

# Hermeneutics and the Worldliness of Faith

*A Festschrift in Memory  
of Carl Michalson*

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### NOTE

THE DREW GATEWAY is proud to be the vehicle for the presentation of the Festschrift for Carl Michalson. Olin Ivey and Gordon Michalson conceived the project and accomplished the first assembling and ordering of the contributions. They also gave valuable counsel after *GATEWAY* took on the project. Special thanks are due to Ann Schoonmaker-Boyd and Paul Grosjean who gave unselfish and competent editorial assistance. I am grateful to the members of the Drew Administration who were patient with the long delays and to Fred Lyford and his staff at Puritan Press who produced the book.

Charles Courtney

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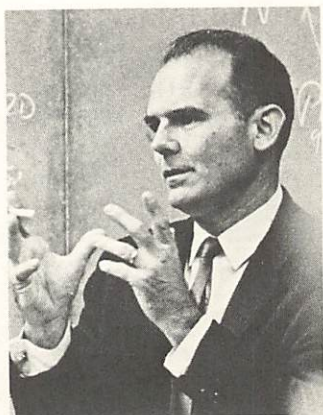
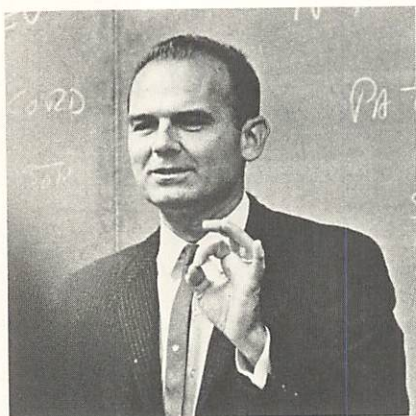
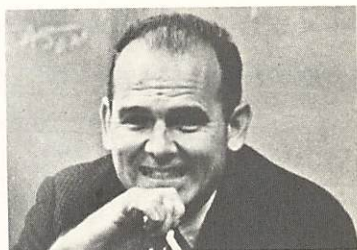
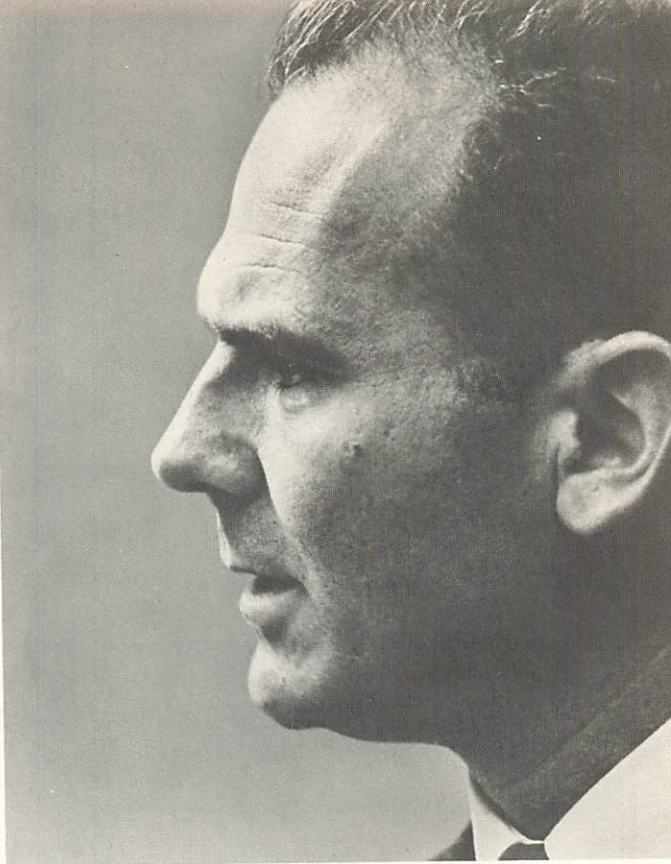
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Photos by Walter Vesper, 1965





## Preface

This collection represents another in a series of "gatherings" around the thought of Carl Michalson since his death in an airplane crash in 1965. The Spring-Summer, 1966 edition of *The Drew Gateway*, under the guidance of Lawrence O. Kline, contained a series of articles "in memoriam." After the careful shepherding of John Godsey, *Worldly Theology: The Hermeneutical Focus of an Historical Faith*, which "Mike" was working on at the time of his death, appeared in 1967. Four Ph.D. dissertations have been written on his thought: Richard Laurence Eslinger, *Historicity and Historicality: A Comparison of Carl Michalson and Oscar Cullmann*; Olin M. Ivey, *The Concept of the Holy Spirit in the Thought of Carl Michalson*; Ellis Blane Johnson, *Carl Michalson's Concept of History as a Theological Method*; and Edward J. Wynne, Jr., *The Implications of Carl Michalson's Theological Method for Christian Education*. Under the leadership of Charles Courtney, the "Ezra Squier Tipple Lectures in Christian Biography" given at Drew University on November 12-13, 1973, focused on the theology of Carl Michalson on the 25th anniversary of his having become a part of the faculty of Drew University. In 1974, *The Witness of Radical Faith*, which contained a series of lectures he was giving around the country and abroad when he was killed, was edited by Gordon E. Michalson and Olin M. Ivey and published by Tidings of Nashville. In addition, numerous articles and some Master's theses have been produced.

Now, on the tenth anniversary of the death of Carl Michalson, the essays contained herein are presented "in memorial celebration" of his life and thought. To realize that has meant neither to concentrate morbidly on the tragedy of his death nor to stare vacantly into the theological future nor to mumble incoherently in a feeble attempt to recover meaning nor to act as custodians of Michalsonian theological constructs and memorabilia. Each of these would be contrary to his understanding of historical *existence*.

From the point of view of the Christian faith, the dimension of eschatological history qualitatively transforms one's understanding of involvement in the historical process. Eschatological history provides the possibility of *maturity* in history. Because of it, meaning can be found in history; indeed, in history alone. This led Carl Michalson to a passionate reformulation of the faith in such a way that it was expressed in radically historical terms, that it evoked historical existence, that it granted meaning to people.

Historically conceived, "in memoriam" is participation in an effecting and creating event whose catalytic locus of reality is a specific moment in a tradition. Rather than a repetition of the past, it is the actualization, the bursting forth of the intentionality of that past in the midst of the contemporary world. It is the attempt to discover through that intentionality possibilities for a new world. "In memoriam," then, is hermeneutically "en potencia."

While it is not our pretention that these essays fulfill the ever-burgeoning potential that was Carl Michalson's, we do hope these theological soundings carry through the intentionality of his life in searching for a proper hermeneutic by which to express in relevant contemporary terms the meaningfulness of the Christian faith. We do not represent a Michalson "school" of thought. That would be contrary to his understanding of the *uniqueness* within historical reality. We have written these essays because we found in Carl Michalson one of the most vibrant, creative, and stimulating theologians of the twentieth century. His way of putting things has caught our imagination and created new theological possibilities for us. His reformulations have challenged us, have caused us to re-examine our own ways of thinking, and simply will not leave us alone.

This volume is divided into two sections. Part one revolves around the theology of Carl Michalson as each author enters into dialog with him or presents for the reader an analysis of some phase of his theology. Hermeneutical themes common to those of Carl Michalson are dealt with in part two. However, they are developed strictly from the vantage point of the author's own theological position. As such, they complement those in part one and represent an introduction to some of the most poignant issues facing the theological world today. Together, they form the basis for much fruitful theological reflection and hermeneutical potential in the advancement of our understanding of the Christian faith.

Two special features are the biographical essay by Carl's distinguished brother, Gordon, who has also contributed much as one of the editors of this *Festschrift* and the reproduction of two watercolors by Carl's widow, Janet Michalson Clasper, who through her art is a prolific theologian in her own right.

In a posture of dialog and hermeneutical wrestling, we present these articles. May they illuminate your existence as Carl Michalson has illuminated ours . . . and we hope, yours.

Olin M. Ivey  
San Jose, Costa Rica



“This view of Mt. Fujii brings back a flood of happy memories. With this painting, I had the pleasure of winning ‘second’ prize in a city-wide art exhibit in Tokyo. Carl and I then enjoyed the fun of purchasing, with the prize money, a beautiful antique wooden ‘Buddha’ image from one of the old temples in Kyoto.”  
*Janet Michalson Clasper*



“While in Japan, I felt sure our budget could be easily managed because Carl would not be tempted to purchase books. How wrong I was! One of his favorite stops was at this tiny book store near the Tokyo Union Campus. Our solvency did not last a month! Not only did he buy books but paid translators ‘many yen’ an hour as well. This became a way of life. For the next two years after our sojourn in Tokyo, Japanese students ‘read’ to him, daily, the writings of Japanese theologians.” *Janet Michalson Clasper*



## Introduction

Just a few weeks before Mike's death, in a plane crash in Ohio, he and Janet and Louise and I were seated in a New Jersey shore restaurant talking leisurely after dinner. Carl and Janet had driven down to join us for a last family bash before each of us returned to the work of the fall. Louise and I had related the circumstances of a seance with the mystic, Arthur Ford, we had witnessed in the home of Dr. and Mrs. Sherwood Eddy some weeks before. "Fletcher," Arthur Ford's "contact," had presumably brought me a series of personal messages from Dr. Ned Soper, the president emeritus of Ohio Wesleyan University who had in later years befriended me when we both taught at Garrett School of Theology.

The substance of Dr. Soper's "messages" was source both of mirth and of some rather pensive reflection. Just as we got up to leave, Carl, in his characteristic mingling of whimsy and seriousness remarked, "Well, let's agree among ourselves that the first of us to go will do his best to send back a message that will be unmistakable."

A few weeks later came that heartbreaking phone call in the middle of the night from a friend in Cincinnati. And the next evening, all of the lights in New York City went out! And spontaneously, in our grief, all of us who had shared the table began to wonder whether Carl had been messing with the cosmic switchboard — maybe even chiding us in our grief, with a dramatic whimsical flourish!

From the times of our boyhood, when he would sleepily comply to my urging that he ride out to the airport with me at five in the morning, so that I could get an hour or so flying in before working hours — complaining about the modest comforts of the luggage carrier over the rear wheel of an ancient Harley Davidson, to the later Jersey days of maturity, when he would complain on the stern of our Barnegat Bay fishing skiff, "Now, if you only had a few books out here, it might be worthwhile . . .," his willingness to mix the concerns of the mind with the hard or the pleasant things of real life characterized his style.

On one of our last visits, I came upon him unannounced in mid-morning at their hillside Morristown home, to find him lounging on a redwood chaise clad in shorts and hairy chest, out on the cliff-hanging balcony reading Heidegger, hi-fi blasting out Mozart from a distance, with a telephone by his side with a thirty-foot cord reaching back into the house.

Jim Davies, Mike's roommate at John Fletcher College, makes much of Mike's playing the "Devil's Advocate" in college debating days. Fletcher's debate team, to which Davies and Mike both belonged, traveled the Midwest college circuit short-handed but highly successful. Each team member was required to be primed on both sides of an issue. This necessity made for ambidexterity. And



women's libbers, who of late in some circles have alluded to what they think was Mike's "male chauvinism" will be informed to know that at one of these Des Moines debate events, he drew the extemporaneous theme, "Down with Women." Fletcher won the meet.

When Mike had enrolled in college, his Christian lines seemed clearly drawn; but his professional intentions were still unfirm. In high school, he had thought of journalism and at Fletcher he edited the school paper. But as his thoughts turned more to the ministry or to teaching, his studies took on greater seriousness. As Davies wrote to Olin Ivey, "He analyzed, and argued. He frequently argued for causes he did not believe in and posed as a revolutionary of some sort . . . He played the part of 'Devil's Advocate' with great effectiveness. Sometimes his role would continue for days, with the result that his name would come up in small prayer groups! I will never know just how much of this was mere flexing of his dramatic muscles or a real seeking after answers."

It should be remembered that John Fletcher College was a Wesleyan oriented school — an unendowed Asbury College — struggling in the midst of the depression. Our father, Carl senior, being an unemployed but loving Christian country banker, had gone to Fletcher as a "dollar a year" man to serve as business manager in exchange for Mike's tuition. The Christian faith, narrowly interpreted as some may have thought, was fervently expressed. "Education" at Fletcher was a very serious junction of piety and learning. However humble students may have held the educational programs to have been at Fletcher in those days, they nevertheless met teachers who were great people, capable of stimulating students to maximum performance.

Schleiermacher may well have said, "religion begins and ends with history" — and indeed, this is what most of this volume is about. But Schleiermacher also said, feelingly, "I am an Herrnhuter, only after a higher order." And scholar and theologian though he was, Sundays usually found Schleiermacher in some pulpit — frequently some hospital pulpit — preaching.

Mike, from his first year in college to the year he died, served the Christian Church as a Wesleyan of an increasingly higher order. In Goose Creek Methodist Church, near University Park, Iowa, Mike as a city boy had his first introduction to rural ways and privileges. He learned to know people and respect them and love them in a pastoral way. Davies, recalling those days, writes, "Mike was a flaming Evangelist . . . I recall one Sunday evening in a little church when he was waxing eloquent over 'leaving all and following Jesus.' He was vividly enumerating the various things to leave and came to the item of money. He whisked out his wallet and, after talking to it for awhile, tossed it away with a flourish. It landed behind the piano by the wall. It was a dramatic gesture and was avidly observed by his little company of worshippers. Later on that evening, after the altar call had been given and the people had gone home, we put out the lights

and pulled the door after us and were rattling our weary way home when suddenly Mike hit the brakes and whirled around in the middle of the road. 'What's the matter?,' I shouted. He didn't answer. He just steered his way back to the little church. In a few minutes I was hoisting him through the window (we had no key for the door) and waiting while he felt around in the dark for the abandoned wallet. 'I thought you were for leaving it all,' I suggested as he came back through the window clutching his rather thin money case. 'Davies, Davies, don't you dare tell them about this,' said Mike with twinkling eyes. We used to kid about his eyes, which would almost disappear when he smiled. He used to say he couldn't laugh while driving because he had to see the road."

Davies can't understand what happened between Mike's first and second year in college. But from this point on, says Davies, Mike was a "no nonsense Mike — Mike the student. Mike the recluse. He dropped his flamboyance (not all of it!). He even changed his famous signature. He was no longer Carl D. Michalson, Jr., but simply Carl Michalson — without flourish."

Well, what happened — and Davies must certainly have forgotten, for it was no secret in those days — was that the home church, Park Avenue Methodist, in Minneapolis, experienced a religious revival of convincing dimensions with dozens of young folk deciding for Christian service. To this day, there are two dozen pastors, teachers and missionaries in the Church who date their decision to this period. The impact of this occasion certainly left a maturing mark on Mike's already sincere Christian life.

And in seminary days, when serving Arlington Avenue Presbyterian Church in East Orange, or pastoring the church in Teabo, Mike's Fletcher experiences were still being repeated — if not necessarily on a higher order, still in a serious vein. He built a little church on Long Island — New Hyde Park — this, during his Yale Divinity School days, when he would be required to commute weekly from New Haven. I had the privilege of sharing some of those parish days with him, as at this time I was serving an East Orange parish. And I know the mutual love and respect that he and his young, eager flock held for one another. In Teabo, it had been a small mining community with humble and devout English and Welsh folk the mainstay of the church. In East Orange, commuting suburbanites comprised the congregation. In New Hyde Park, a brand new commuting community, young, eager families just starting out lent aggressive leadership to the new church. In these days, Mike was practicing what he held always to be true, as Thomas Bonhoeffer put it, "One does not study theology to learn theology but to learn to preach."

After completing his doctorate under Douglas Clyde Macintosh and H. Richard Niebuhr at Yale, he continued the rigorous life of reading and writing which eventuated in his publishing history. But he hesitated to leap into print. His *Faith for Personal Crises* had originally been created as a series of lectures delivered in parishes —



an extension of his bent on pastoral theology. I heard them in their early form in First Methodist Church, Montclair, where they were delivered to my young adults. But it was only after they had been given so many times that they were honed smooth, that he sent them to press.

Teaching and writing at Drew was the major thrust of his professional life. But he extended this in a barnstorming style of ministry across the nation which had, doubtless, a mixture of pastoral concerns and practical intentions. His speaking schedule was a valuable recruiting device, attracting students to Drew. But as one recalls the variety of groups within the Church to which he ministered — campus chapels, preachers institutes, gatherings of missionaries or deaconesses or Christian educators — one remembers how often in discussion he would seem to define his self-conscious role in the statement, "I am a pastoral theologian."

Although Mike was nearly five years my junior, he had clearer Christian insights than I had and at an earlier age. And he had managed to complete college before I entered. So, in some respects, he fulfilled the role of an elder brother. When it came time for me to enter seminary, he insisted that Edwin Lewis was reason enough to come to Drew — where he was already a senior. He introduced me to Lewis' controversial though captivating evangelical volume, *A Christian Manifesto*. It was Lewis who brought him back to Drew as his assistant; and Lewis' chair, he finally occupied.

When in the early days of World War II, I felt compelled to enlist, he counseled me quite objectively. When the day arrived that I should receive my commission, he accompanied me to New York. When the ceremony was over, and we walked down the street together, he looked at me and said, "I never thought you'd do it!" I had no notion then nor now, whether this was a rebuke or a simple expression of surprise.

He had the capacity of gathering up all of his focus in a single statement. This was, perhaps, due both to his flair for the dramatic and his "elder brother" role. I sought his advice when opportunity opened in later years to move from the parish to teaching in seminary. His response was, "Well, now we'll have something to talk about!"

When an invitation came to a college presidency, his pointed advice was, "All I can say is that you'll be able to afford a good meal, but won't have the appetite to eat it."

The day he left for Morristown airport, as Janet told us afterward, the weather had worsened and he was obliged to take off on the charter trip to Kennedy earlier than he expected. Janet prepared lunch, as Mike in typical whimsical fashion, cast a look at the weather, then said, "This may be the last meal I shall eat with you!"

The evening before, Janet and Mike had entertained students and a few professors in an informal discussion of the "death of God" movement. The next morning, the books were still open on the

coffee table. And as I wandered aimlessly about the house, having picked up Karen Michalson at Ohio Wesleyan enroute to Morristown, I looked at the top of Mike's busy desk. There was a pile of manuscripts he was getting in order to publish — later to be completed by John Godsey in the posthumous volume, *Worldly Theology*. There was a recommendation written on behalf of one of his prize students — excessive, I then thought; but prophetic as it turned out. And there was this self-recriminatory note, hastily scribbled out and propped up prominently where he could not miss it, when next he pulled up his chair. It read, "Take no more engagements. Stay home and think!"

Knowing Mike's predilection for the Lutheran description of faith as an "acoustical affair," and his life-long peripatetic ministry of preaching, I have often wondered why the note did not read, "Stay home and listen."

Yet this is the burden the Christian scholar bears — of wondering whether his thinking is, indeed, not his form of listening.

Each scholar has his purple passages. Lewis, who was Mike's mentor even as he moved from Lewis to Heim to Barth to existentialism and Kierkegaard to Husserl and phenomenology to Heidegger and hermeneutics, was wont to declare, as he did in *A Christian Manifesto*, "No cause is secure, whose adherents have lost their morale. The morale of the Christian Church is Christian certainty."

Mike, convinced that her faith was the one unique thing about the Christian Church and that witnessing to her faith was her proper and inescapable role, could epitomize his essential meaning: "To say it with utter simplicity, the preaching of the Gospel is the telling of a story of God's turning to man in Jesus of Nazareth" (*The Hinge of History*, p. 112).

It is high time that this volume of reflection and appreciation, so long in the gathering, should come before the readers who were nourished by Mike's ministry of thought and faithfulness — and before other readers, who have come on the Church's scene in recent years. Those who have known his ministry will share my deep gratitude, and that of his loved ones, to the writers of the essays of memory in this volume, and to my colleagues in this venture, Professor Olin Ivey of the Seminario Biblico Latino-americano, Costa Rica, and Professor Charles Courtney of Drew. We are also deeply grateful to Drew University's leadership for making this publication possible; and to my secretary, Mrs. Daniel Moynihan, for manuscript editing.

Gordon E. Michalson

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## **PART ONE:**

# **Carl Michalson's Theology**



# The Philosophical Background of Carl Michalson's Theology

Charles Courtney

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## INTRODUCTION

It is fitting that Carl Michalson be the subject of Drew's Tipple Lectures on Christian biography.\* Through his writing, lecturing, and preaching he came to have an international reputation as Drew's most brilliant professor. In addition, he participated in an earlier series of Tipple Lectures. The 1953-54 series, twenty years ago, was devoted to "Christianity and the Existentialists." Carl Michalson helped plan the series, gave the introductory lecture, and edited the book containing the lectures. Further, the biographical form is well-suited to his thought. Those of you who have read his books will remember that he characteristically, and often very effectively, will make a key point by telling a story drawn from his own family life or his life at the School. After I had read *The Hinge of History* and before I ever met Carl Michalson, it occurred to me that his historical, existential, personal approach to theology opened up new possibilities for a venerable, but neglected, genre, hagiography — the lives of the saints. A book of the saints à la Michalson would contain seemingly mundane miracles, but it would be provocative and edifying. When I told him of my idea, he was surprised and receptive. But what would he have thought about a biography of himself, of a series of Tipple Lectures in his honor? He would have been surprised and restless. But the biography we are fashioning here is not an act of piety for a saint. Rather, we are celebrating Carl Michalson, the thinker; and the stories of thinkers have mainly to do with their thought. It is my task to consider the philosophical background of Carl Michalson's theology.

First, I would like to discuss Michalson as a student and presenter of philosophy. Then I will examine the function of philosophy in his thought. Finally, I will offer an evaluation and make some suggestions for the future appropriation of his thought.

### I.

Carl Michalson was first and last a theologian, though philosophy was very important to him. It was Edwin Lewis' *A Christian Manifesto* that led him to matriculate at Drew. But, under Lewis and

\*First presented at Drew Theological School, November 13, 1973, as one of the Ezra Squier Tipple Lectures given in honor of Carl Michalson.

Lynn Harold Hough, he wrote an M. A. thesis on "Human Responsibility in Plato's Republic and the Synoptic Gospels." His Ph.D. dissertation on the relation of revelation and reason in the apologetic theology of Karl Heim led him to study Heim's proposal for a metaphysical science of the Ultimate and Heim's theory of dimensions. When, in 1962, the Theological School Alumni Association asked which books had influenced him most, he listed two philosophical classics: Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. (The others were four contemporary theology books, four novels, and his grandmother's illustrated Bible.)

As a teacher and writer, Carl Michalson sought to present philosophical thinking to his students and readers. I have already mentioned the series of Tipple Lectures which were among the earliest and best introductions to existentialists in this country. Some of his course titles were "Philosophical Theism," "Philosophical Anthropology," "The Christian in Contemporary Philosophy," and "Philosophical Backgrounds of Theology." Michalson's lecture notes, and those of his students, show that he worked long and hard with classical and contemporary figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Ayer, and Whitehead. Philosophy was part of his background and he sought to make it a lively background for his students. (May I add that in the last few years I have worked with some of the same materials, but with philosophy in the foreground? So "Philosophical Backgrounds of Theology" has become "God and the Philosophers" and "The Christian in Contemporary Philosophy" has become "Recent Philosophies of Man.") Michalson reviewed, mostly for the *Drew Gateway*, dozens of books in philosophy and philosophical theology.

What judgments can be drawn about Michalson as expositor of philosophy? First, some positive points. In all of his wide-ranging study he had an unerring sense for the pungent observation, the insight or figure of speech that lay bare the phenomenon in question. An example of the kind of thing that caught his attention is the list of 22 of Kierkegaard's illustrations of the comic incommensurability of the objective and subjective modes of relation.<sup>1</sup> His exposition of St. Thomas on the being and aseity of God showed both penetration and a close acquaintance with neo-Thomists such as Gilson and Maritain. But on the negative side, notes on his final lecture course show Michalson dominated by Heidegger's interpretation of the history of Western philosophy. And Robert Osborn observes that Michalson dealt with those philosophies, such as existentialism, instrumentalism, and psycho-analysis, which are helpful in articulating the incarnational intent of the Word.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we see that

1. Carl Michalson, *Worldly Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), pp. 119-20.

2. Robert T. Osborn, "Carl Michalson as Teacher," in *The Drew Gateway*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 3 (Spring-Summer, 1966), p. 104.

he was using philosophy for his own theological purposes, rather than presenting philosophical thought for its own sake. That is fair enough, so long as the student or reader will go to the original and consult a variety of interpretations. Michalson served himself well at philosophy's table; his followers should not stop with reading his menu, but should serve themselves.

Carl told me, in one of the last conversations we had, that he had almost ceased to read books carefully. "I flip pages," he said. That was not always the case. By the time he was flipping pages he was a mature mind pursuing a particular path. He had settled on a method and a message and was beginning to articulate it. What was his position and what place did philosophy have in it?

## II.

Carl Michalson was a theologian; he had a message to proclaim. Once when we were planning course offerings, he encouraged jazzy course titles if that would help attract students. For, he said, "I'm in this business to influence people." Yet his urgency for proclamation was coupled with a serious concern for a correct method. So Michalson did not go through several different theologies in his career. Rather, starting from the conviction that God revealed himself savingly in Jesus of Nazareth, Michalson sought the way of thinking that did justice to that revelation. Following Kierkegaard, he believed that faith is a matter of decision, a question not of "What is Christianity?," but of "How can I become a Christian?" Still the theologian and preacher must be extremely careful about the way they present the call for decision. Michalson particularly sought to get clear on the nature of theology. And to the extent that he did *this* rather than present a system or statement of belief, he can be called a philosopher of theology. For example, *The Hinge of History* opens with the statement that it is "an introduction to theology in the sense that it projects a method of thinking about the Christian faith."<sup>3</sup> Yet two pages later he makes some statements which for me signal a major difficulty with Michalson's theology. He says, "while one is reading a book about the faith he should not be distracted by indifferent matters which require him to suspend his existence. He should feel his life affected."<sup>4</sup> That is, he wants the book in which he presents a theory about theology to be itself an instance of theologizing. Can this desire be satisfied without leading to confusion? Let us post the question now and return to it later.

A central concern of Michalson's dissertation on Heim was to determine the extent to which there is continuity or likeness between God and man. Michalson decided that there is no continuity between God and man. This decision governed all of Michalson's

3. Carl Michalson, *The Hinge of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 9.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

subsequent work, including the way he regarded and employed philosophy.

First, let us look at the dissertation. Heim's theory of dimensions gave Michalson a grasp of the distinction between God and man which he never lost. Briefly, the idea is that different dimensions of reality co-exist without confusion. Heim points to the three dimensions of geometrical space, to time, or the fourth dimension, then argues that the personal dimension and the divine dimension are also affirmable. No dimension is reducible to another or is understandable in terms of another. (A simple but instructive illustration of the doctrine is *Flatland* by Edwin Abbott, which shows how creatures who experience space in two dimensions are totally incapable of understanding a visitor who speaks of the third dimension.) Michalson comments that Heim's view

of the transcendence of God takes the problem of revelation and reason out of the context of such contrasts as religion and culture, the sacred and the profane, religious truth and general truth. The contrast is rather between God and man, God and the world, God and history, God and time, which is all by way of saying the unconditional condition of all conditions. . . . To reduce God to categories of religious history is to juxtapose God and the finite and to introduce the necessity for a new ground of understanding beyond God and the finite, which new ground . . . would by definition be God.<sup>5</sup>

Heim contended that reason could show the *possibility* of divine revelation (it would not contradict the rest of what we know about reality) and the *necessity* of revelation for salvation (there is nothing in the world that can give ultimate meaning). This is the element of continuity in Heim. But the discontinuity is that God must show himself if he is to be known. That revelation is possible and necessary for salvation, reason may establish; but that there is a revelation is completely dependent upon God. Michalson's complaint against Heim is that the continuity between revelation and reason is only apparent. In fact, says Michalson, Heim's science of the Ultimate and his reading of the nature of the world covertly presuppose the Christian revelation. A frank avowal of that would injure Heim's case with those who do not share his presupposition and would render dispensable his case with those who do. That is, his apologetic strategy fails. Michalson concludes that "Heim has unsuccessfully attempted to make a philosophy of religion out of the *sola fide* principle of the protestant reformation."<sup>6</sup>

What, then, is the proper relation between theology and

5. Carl Michalson, "The Problem of Revelation and Reason in the Theology of Karl Heim" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1945), pp137-38

6. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

philosophy? *The Hinge of History* gives us the next part of Michalson's answer.

We have already noted that Michalson proposes a method for theology in that book. The method is existential interpretation and the resulting theology is conceived as history. Michalson notes that theology has often taken its method from philosophy or the natural sciences. His proposal is to correlate historical method and theological understanding. The advantage is crucial for it offers the possibility, he says, of expressing "the Christian faith in the terms in which the faith occurs, which is history."<sup>7</sup> Theologies correlated with ontology or natural science transpose faith into a foreign medium. They shoot over the realm of human existence by referring to supernatural or eternal structures, or they shoot under it by interpreting faith in subpersonal categories applicable to nature. Michalson, following Gogarten, asks whether it is not rather "true that revelation happens where nothing but history happens, so that theology must look for nothing and believe in nothing which is not history."<sup>8</sup>

As Michalson sets about presenting this new way of theologizing he can appeal to several thinkers who have helped to define existential, historical interpretation. Among them are Schleiermacher, Lessing, Collingwood, Husserl, and Dilthey. But there is an even more intimate way in which philosophy is involved in the project. *Existentialism* is the way of being and thinking which is correlated directly with Christian faith. Let us look at this correlation.

History, according to Michalson, is the realm in which the question of meaning arises. Historical meaning appears in several dimensions, but we have history properly speaking when the question of meaning involves the questioner and, more, involves the very being of the questioner. Contemporary existentialism raises the question of the meaning of human existence and explores the possibilities of a satisfying answer to the quest for ultimate meaning. Here, philosophy is doing more than providing methods and thought forms for theology. It actually is pursuing the same task. Michalson says, "In existentialism, philosophical and theological concerns have come together in a way unprecedented in western thought."<sup>9</sup>

Michalson first looks at existentialism's *contribution* to historical understanding. It works in the dimension of existential history and has the following features. (1) The existentialist is engaged. One can be a spectator of the panorama of world historical events, but "world history becomes existential history the moment one sees oneself as already embarked . . . already afloat on that ship."<sup>10</sup> (2) The

7. *The Hinge of History*, p. 24.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 35.



existentialist sees the gaps in history. Events occur but the connections between them are not discernible. There is the sense of experiencing one damn thing after another, and sometimes even that minimal temporal sequence is lost. What we expect does not occur, but rather something else. What we set out to do we do not achieve. In this connection Michalson quotes Paddy Chayevski's portrayal of the past as "the long parade of history that has brought us to this year of suicides and insanity."<sup>11</sup> The engaged person experiences the gaps of history as flaws or emptiness in his own being. (3) The existentialist refuses "to live with equanimity in the presence of separated things."<sup>12</sup> That is, the gaps of history are not ignored or covered cosmetically. Rather, they lead to a definition of man as tension between sheer facticity and project. He is the reality which is the relation between past and future. Man is essentially stretched out beyond what he is, stretched toward the possibility of being or not being; and therein lies human freedom. Michalson quotes Flaubert, who says, "If the feeling of human insufficiency, of the nothingness of life, were to perish . . . we should be more stupid than the birds."<sup>13</sup> (4) Existentialism fails to find ultimate meaning. The consequence of fearlessly facing the gaps of history is the acknowledgment that history is meaningless. Nowhere in time or the world is satisfaction given. Existentialism shows man as needy; Michalson calls it "the discipline of thirst."<sup>14</sup> The existentialist is always *en route*, is forever striving for meaning but never arriving. Existentialism serves culture and the church by exposing the false finalities that people have adopted and taken refuge in. Here is one pertinent quotation:

Several generations of Christians have been made anxious by Nietzsche's announcement that "God is dead." Contemporary existentialists, by taking up the cry, have renewed the anxiety of the church. "We believe in God!" the Christians assert, and then dismiss existentialism as atheistic. What is rarely understood about existentialism is that its obituary at the grave of God is meant to be the testimony of a witness. Deicide has been committed. Someone has failed to let God be. Existentialism is not the murderer. It is simply the witness to the crime. As Nietzsche said, it is the churches which are the tombs of God, and God is not dead because he never existed, but because his worshippers have killed him with belief. The very manner of the church's credence is the murder weapon. Christian believers have constructed theistic world-views where decisions were required. They have

11. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

made God in man's image without being correct about man in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

Existentialists "come up hard against the boundary of their humanity."<sup>16</sup> As existentialists they do not know what is at the limit; they find nothing. Michalson discovers unanimity among existentialist philosophers on this point even though they do a variety of things at the limit. Marcel and Berdyaev leap into a relation of devotion to God, Heidegger and Jaspers wait in metaphysical wistfulness, and Camus and Sartre rebel against the possibility of God.<sup>17</sup> So there is a double witness provided by existentialism. It exposes false faith and it resolutely lives in the absence of revelation. Michalson shrewdly shows the compatibility of existentialism and classical theism. Existentialism asserts the apparent absence of God from the world, while classical theism, through its doctrine of God as self-existing and eternal, asserts the necessity of God's apparent absence from the world.<sup>18</sup>

To this existential history Michalson correlates eschatological history, the history connected with Christian revelation and faith. Eschatological history is made possible by the event of Christ which provides "the hinge by which all history hangs together."<sup>19</sup> The gaps of history are overcome because in Jesus of Nazareth it is shown that God is at the limit of history. God is the creator of history and the world is given to mankind as the arena in which to become fully human and serve God. The drive toward God, or the Christian intention, is manifested by both existentialism and the biblical witness, but it is only at one point, the event of Christ, that the intention is fulfilled. God meets the human project with his benevolent presence in Jesus. God's presence is a paradigmatic, mysterious, originating event in that it is discontinuous with all that preceded it yet provides the meaning of all subsequent events.<sup>20</sup>

Now that we have before us an outline of Michalson's correlation between existentialism and eschatology, philosophy and faith, let us examine it.

We have noted how Michalson rejected Heim's apologetic theology. He takes care to point out that in his own theology existentialism is not used apologetically. He says that when a philosophy is used apologetically the philosophy is made "to corroborate the substance of the faith."<sup>21</sup> Obviously, that is not the case with Michalson's use of existentialism, for existentialism does not present an ultimate meaning in any form. At another place, following Bonhoeffer, he warns of "the temptation to make existential yearning

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

for ultimate meaning, or the sense of tragedy without it, the human presupposition of the Christian faith."<sup>22</sup> Such a synthesis would make the feeling of the need of God the necessary first step toward the knowledge of God. Michalson clearly does not do that, for he insists that the entire initiative in revelation remains with God. But two critical comments seem called for at this point. First, the fact remains that Michalson's theology of correlation is constructed with the existentialist moment as an integral part. Since he does this, is he not implying that the Christian message is maximally intelligible only when connected with the human experience of thirst for meaning? Second, he asserts, in philosophy's behalf, that philosophy should not be used apologetically since it then becomes only an ancillary of the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup>

But Michalson chooses existentialism because it is nearer to history and because it is less comprehensive and less intrusive than other philosophies. Does this not suggest that Michalson wants to use precisely this philosophy which can be kept in a subordinate position? Now, of course, to the extent that a philosophy presents itself as an alternative to faith, Michalson is justified in pairing it up with his theology and pointing out its deficiencies from the Christian point of view. But is Michalson not repeating what he found objectionable in Heim? Is he not covertly allowing the Christian revelation to stipulate limits for philosophy's contribution?

A reference to Kierkegaard will help clarify what Michalson has done in this connection. As Michalson himself points out, Kierkegaard wrote in two different modes. First there were the pseudonymous works which "he called purely aesthetic, ethical, and religious works, with no evident relation to Christian faith. These works, however, were calculated traps. Once the cultured got inside his writing they were forced on and on from one stage of life to the next until at last they felt themselves existing with such fundamental seriousness that they needed the understanding of life which only a deep faith could supply."<sup>24</sup> The stage was set for the second mode, published under Kierkegaard's name, which is "direct instruction about the meaning of being a Christian."<sup>25</sup>

My suggestion is that Kierkegaard's two modes of discourse are paralleled by the two parts of Michalson's theology, existential history and eschatological history. The account of the fruitless existential search for meaning sets the stage for the presentation of the Christian message. But the differences between Kierkegaard's thought and Michalson's thought reveal a difficulty with Michalson's position. Kierkegaard's work is one literary whole. His presentation of the preliminary aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages are *his* own.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Carl Michalson, ed., *The Witness of Kierkegaard* (New York: Association Press, 1960), pp. 11-12.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

They are fashioned to fit, to correlate with, the Christian message. The strategy is complex and subtle; it works because it is the work of a single author. Kierkegaard employs pseudonyms, but the fictitious authors are created by him for his own purposes. The two parts of Michalson's theology cannot be made to hang together so well. At first glance Michalson's existentialists seem to be a good parallel to Kierkegaard's pen names. After all, Kierkegaard is the father of existentialist thought and many of the themes he introduced are echoed in the work of such thinkers as Camus and Sartre. But there is a crucial difference in Michalson's thought. He has turned a literary strategy, a mode of indirect discourse, into a doctrine, a way of defining certain other men, philosophy, and culture. Where Kierkegaard showed certain selected forms of life, Michalson interprets certain philosophies and then makes some judgments about the nature of philosophy and the possibility of meaning outside the light of the Christian revelation. In making this point I am not blind to Michalson's great admiration for Kierkegaard. He follows his mentor brilliantly, especially in the way he deftly but definitely presents the message itself. But he went beyond Kierkegaard precisely at the point where he exceeded the bounds of his own approach. That is, by making a theoretical method out of a successful literary strategy he failed to think historically. How is it that Michalson landed himself in this difficulty? I have two suggestions. One is that he was not aware how his method differed from Kierkegaard's. The other is that, having seen the difficulty with Karl Heim's attempt to work out an apologetic theology or a philosophy of religion, Michalson chose not to try to work out an alternative philosophical view. The result is a view of philosophy which fails to do justice to philosophy and which is in tension with Michalson's own commitment to think historically.

What is the situation in the later writings, principally, *The Rationality of Faith* and *Worldly Theology*? The purpose of the first of these books is "to regularize and carry forward the suggestions for more radical revision of theological method which . . . *The Hinge of History* . . . proposed."<sup>26</sup> That, indeed, is what is done. Michalson draws the distinction between nature and history more rigorously and in more detail; and he lays out the basic features of a theology conceived as history, treating time as imminence, memory as forgiveness, language as performance, society as church, decision as grace, and power as holy spirit. There is no change, however, in the function of philosophy. Philosophy can help to shed light on the structure of historical existence, but since it can not touch the Christian revelation it must merely represent the possibility of an unconsummated desire for meaning. In nature, the question of meaning is not allowed to rise; in existentialism, the question cannot

26. Carl Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 7.

be answered; only in the Christ event, which is a thoroughly historical event, is history's limit, and thus history's meaningfulness, shown.

For Michalson the nature/history dichotomy is indeed radical. He has failed to persuade many to accept his position. Some have misunderstood him, but others have given reasons for rejecting his proposal. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche considered the problem of the proper use of history. He noted that the first generation to see clearly the difference between scientific and historical thinking would spend much of their energies setting themselves over against what they oppose. They would present either/or alternatives. Building constructively on the new insights is the work of the second generation. Michalson believed he had discovered in history something that is crucial for authentic theology. Through his desire not to lose hold of the critical point, he became burdened with some of the disadvantages of first generation thinking. But there are some indications that he was becoming his own second generation.

In the essays posthumously published under the title *Worldly Theology* an important new theme emerges, namely, that of maturity. Who is mature? The man of faith who is not a child or slave, but the full heir, the one who cares for the world which is God's. The radical distinction between God and man remains. Man is *coram deo*, before God; but rather than being on his knees as a devoted worshipper of the divine, Michalson's mature man is before God, turned toward the world. His task is to make a world, a world that is suited for human beings. The mature worldly Christian does not submit to supernatural power or churchly authority. Rather, he enjoys the divine gift of living in freedom and responsibility. In these last essays, Michalson emphasizes the modesty of the Christian revelation; it comes as a hint.<sup>27</sup> God is present as he exists in Jesus, that is, as Jesus lives a human life in total obedience to God.

Does this new emphasis on maturity lead to any changes in the way Michalson regards philosophy? Yes it does. Whereas before, the existentialist and Christian ways were opposed as meaninglessness versus meaning, we now hear Michalson saying that the worldly Christian is indistinguishable from the mature worldly humanist. Since the task of the Christian is to be a worldly agent, there is much to be learned from those who are wise in the ways of the world. Earlier Michalson said that a full understanding of the futility of existentialist history can only be had from the perspective of the gospel. Now he says that the meaning and action characteristic of the mature non-Christian needs nothing more than to be coupled with the word that the world is God's. Without this knowledge, living responsibly in the world may be a fate rather than a freedom. "Modern man is right to feel responsible for the world. The preaching of the church makes it possible for man to remain free for

that responsibility by receiving it from God.”<sup>28</sup> Michalson notes that in recent American theology philosophy tends to be more than a handmaiden, a midwife, or a dialogical partner. That is, he avers, “a sign of theological maturity . . . theology is no longer exploiting philosophy for theological purposes . . . [and] theology has a realistic appraisal of its limitations and how modest its claims are, materially speaking.”<sup>29</sup> He says, “Christians are not bent upon converting men to Christ . . . Christians are responsible for announcing the eschaton and thus for bringing the world to expression as creation, as responsible sonship. Therefore, when we hold out faith to men, we do not do so in the expectation of taking something from them, or even of giving something to them which they do not have. We do so to confirm and strengthen them in what they could indeed already in some sense have.”<sup>30</sup>

The key Biblical warrant that Michalson, following Gogarten, takes for his worldly theology of maturity is Galatians 4:1-7:

the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!” So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

Coupled with this should be another story about a son of God, namely, Mark 12:1-8:

A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him, and sent him away emptyhanded. Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son; finally he sent him to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” But those tenants said to one another, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” And they took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.

Maturity is no guarantee of security and success. Perhaps this note of caution is not necessary, for Michalson's theology never tended toward triumphalism. But the warning may be helpful since Michalson seems largely uncritical of the worldly theater he had discovered. He always had a keen sense for the critical situation, as witness his book *Faith for Personal Crises*. A theology continued in the direction Michalson was charting could learn from philosophical accounts of crisis or limit situations such as those provided by Karl Jaspers.

### III.

What can we say now in conclusion about Carl Michalson's use of philosophy? I can only admire the effort he put into his own philosophical education and the freshness with which he presented his interpretations. He was more conversant with philosophers than most other theologians. But his concern with philosophy did not lead him to abandon the theological circle to become a theologian of culture or a philosophical theologian. His own image for his moves toward philosophy is that of being on a border patrol. Michalson functioned as a scout, not so much to help the church conquer new territory, but more to learn from philosophy more effective ways of challenging Christians with their faithlessness. He was one border patrolman who never seriously considered slipping over to the other side. The image of border patrol also suggests the adversary relation that determined his relation to philosophy. He tended to see philosophy as either (a) covertly theological, as in Karl Heim or Karl Jaspers; (b) anti-theological, as in Sartre or positivism; or (c) pre-theological, as in Heidegger. Philosophical thought was mainly to be combatted or exploited. This attitude is expressed in his regret that for Tillich philosophical language becomes formative and not simply expressive of the theological position.<sup>31</sup> Do those alternatives exhaust the possibilities? Can philosophy not stand in its own right alongside theology without being in competition? In particular, is there not room for a philosophy of religion which stands close to theology as a partner in the task of thinking the life of faith? Michalson once called philosophy of religion the adopted child that keeps intact the marriage between philosophy and religion. Now we all know that it is not good to use a child to keep a marriage intact and such a plan is of doubtful benefit to the child. Religion does not need philosophy in order to be aligned with thinking. Theology is the most intimate way of relating thinking and faith and Michalson has given a brilliant example of that kind of thinking. But thought can also relate to these matters from a different and more distant point. Such thought is philosophical thinking. One advantage of seeing the

31. Carl Michalson, "Recent Theology" (a review article), in *The Drew Gateway*, Vol. XXVI, No. 4 (Summer, 1956), p. 205.



relationships this way is that a given person is not forced to choose between doing the one and doing the other. The same person can do both. Michalson might have wanted to do both; surely he could have done well at both tasks. But a certain commitment to the faith and a concern about some fundamental points prevented him from moving to the philosophical stance or fully appreciating the viability of that stance. Michalson was a thinker with one task and he chose always to be doing that task, even when the criteria of clarity and respect for others indicated that another task was called for.

Lastly, let us consider the possibilities for carrying on the thought that Michalson inaugurated. What are the current tasks for philosophy and for theology? Michalson attempted to think the relation between God and man, and at the same time resolutely preserve the difference between them. His brilliant suggestions about that limit invite further philosophical reflection. A philosopher could take Michalson's thought as an example of creative religious thinking and assess his contribution to our understanding of the limit. My own hunch is that Michalson's refusal to say anything about the other side of the limit is in an uneasy tension with, in fact, is just the reverse side of, a theology which says very much about the transcendent. Further thought about limit experiences could lead to a richer and more stable third position. Michalson's celebration of the world as the arena for discipleship calls for a philosophical reflection on worldliness or the inter-world as Merleau-Ponty called it. Michalson liked existentialism partly because it was not comprehensive and therefore not intrusive. Phenomenology has made that line of thinking more comprehensive in our time and contributions of such thinkers as Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Schutz would be more a help than a hindrance for the development of a worldly theology.

How could the theological side be developed in our time? I indicated earlier that Michalson was already beginning to be his own second generation. His thought was for the most part a theology between the times and therefore was, as he himself put it, modest, confused, fragmentary, rash, and percussive.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps it is time to build on his best insights and develop a line of thinking that has a different pace and rhythm — a mature thinking that looks deeply into the experiences of faith and unfaith in the world and speaks that experience honestly and creatively for us all. Carl may already have been going far in that direction. He was reading Hegel's early theological writings in the fall of 1965 and he told me his surprise and delight in finding that "it is all there." *What* is there? A religion that is communitarian, spiritual, free, immediate, determined by love. That could indeed lead to one interesting form of worldly theology. Michalson found the young Hegel to be a poet, and no less than three times in the last month of his lectures he read to his class Hegel's moving account of Mary Magdalene's "beautiful act" of washing

Jesus' feet with her hair and precious oil. Whatever may be the future influence of his thought, we who knew him and loved him can testify that he did pour himself out among us in a beautiful act of love and obedience.

# Theology, Culture, and the "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

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Of several possible birds, which does the historian deal with? The natural standpoint dictates that the historian deals with the ornithological bird. In fear of snaring the bird of aesthetic daydreams instead (i.e. "bird thou never wert"), the analyst seems to choose the ornithological bird. It has been said of the man's, worm's, and bird's eye views of history, "They are all of the same field" (A.M. MacIver). That is the simplistic mistake of the natural attitude, for there is also the historian's bird.

(*Worldly Theology*, p. 48)

The "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens. It is a poem in thirteen segments, or "stanzas," really thirteen mini-poems of varying length, from two to seven lines, resembling in some segments the Japanese *haiku*. Each segment has its own special image or metaphor, showing or telling us what the blackbird is like; but the movement through the segments is not *epiphoric* (an easy movement from likeness to likeness), but *diaphoric* (a movement from unlikeness to unlikeness, in which our seeing moves *through* the images so juxtaposed, and does not cling to any one of them). The very number *thirteen* is eccentric. The number of lines in each stanza, as well as their forms, is eccentric. The lack of associational compatability between images is eccentric. Yet, taken all together, the result is most happily epiphoric!

But how can this be? Taken singly, the segments are like photographic slides, each picture framed in its own perspectival complex and quite unlike the following frames. The number *thirteen* is arbitrary. We might just as well have an indefinite number of poetic segments — which, perhaps, the number *thirteen* signifies. Meanwhile, to change the figure, the blackbird continually escapes

through the verbal lattices which the poet has designed to frame him. The blackbird becomes equally a symbol for the fleeting and for the ineffable; and what unites the segments of the poem is not the blackbird, but the recognition that our ways of seeing "a blackbird" are precisely *ways of seeing*. We are suddenly and therapeutically released from the absolutistic or exclusivistic claims of any particular way of seeing whatsoever.

I

I invoke this poem in this brief examination of the theology of Carl Michalson and his contribution to culture for a variety of reasons. In the first place I have been more than usually ambivalent about undertaking the task at all. Like the poet

I was of three minds

Like a tree

In which there are three blackbirds.

There were, there are, at least three Michalsons. There was Michalson the student and scholar, Michalson the teacher and preacher, Michalson the theologian.<sup>1</sup> As student and scholar, he was always avid and perceptive, extraordinarily deft and plausible; he had, if cornered in debate, an almost Protean (sometimes Machiavellian) genius for changing his shape and wriggling through the "taking net." As teacher and preacher, his talent amounted almost to genius. Here his winsomeness, his wit, his adroitness, his clarity and complexity (the two are not necessarily opposed) made for a unique persuasiveness both in pedagogy and proclamation. As theologian, he was one of the ablest of his generation. He wrote well. The range of his references, particularly in contemporary thought and letters, is impressive.

But just here three other blackbirds appear in the tree: There is Michalson the existentialist and phenomenologist; there is Michalson the continental theologian; and paradoxically, there is Michalson the innovator and fideist. Since the first two of these undergo radical mutations during the development of his thought, it is important to note the decisions that he made. The third (the fideist) remains hidden for the most part, being a subconscious or preconscious conditioning which rarely breaks through the sophisticated overlarding of his formal thought. Nevertheless, the deeper undercurrent of his thinking moves more and more decisively in this fideist direction.

For this reason, and in the second place, I have felt ambivalent about Michalson's theology. There is in it what I have always felt to be a deep equivocation. I do not intend the term either pejoratively or superficially, but, to use an illustrious example, I intend it much

1. My personal appreciations of Carl Michalson and his work have been published elsewhere. Cf. *The Drew Gateway*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 3 (Spring-Summer, 1966), pp. 114-21. What I shall undertake here is a more critical evaluation of his work as it stands in our present cultural situation. It was first presented at Drew Theological School, November 12, 1973, as one of the Ezra Squier Tipple Lectures given in honor of Carl Michalson.



as one does when one speaks of the Socratic equivocation in the works of Plato, or as Michalson himself uses the term in speaking of the equivocation in the works of Tillich, Heidegger, and Ött. This is difficult to specify. It points to something covert, hidden, not disclosed; but it may also point to elements not reconciled, perhaps not reconcilable. This might be something as simple as a conflict between the thinker's method and his dogmatic claims; or it might be as complex as a thinker's fidelity to the patterns and claims which his vocation imposes upon him as over against a deeper fidelity to the authentic witness of his own inner experience or quest.

The point is crucial when it comes to speaking of Michalson's contribution to culture. Here again I confess to ambivalence. From a strictly formal and critical point of view it is difficult to speak of his contribution to culture because he didn't make any. He spoke frequently of certain poets and literary people, but not for the sake of literature. He would occasionally refer to an artist, but not for the sake of art. He wrote extensively about history, but not for the sake of history. All this was for the sake of theology. The same was true of philosophy. "I must confess," he wrote, "that I am vocationally neither an historian nor a philosopher. I am a 'theologian.'"<sup>2</sup> But there is a deeper sense in which one may speak of his contribution to culture. His theology arose out of a high sensitivity to the culturo-theological situation; it appropriated its momentums — philosophically, religiously, historically — and attempted a radical revisioning of what it means to be a Christian.

There is a sense, of course, in which we are all theologians — all of us, that is, who speak or think with conscious religious concern. Theology had to do, originally, with talk about the gods. But Michalson was a theologian with a difference. As theologian he was persuaded that he was responsible (a) "for saying what it means to be a Christian," and (b) "how that meaning affects man's other attitudes toward the world."<sup>3</sup> Obviously there are implications for the culture in the second of these commitments. Michalson was not unaware of this, and took it into account boldly (and with a noticeable flex of his rhetorical muscles) in the third of his definitive commitments. He recognized that the "stance" set forth in (a) and (b) might well prove "culturally menacing" when it becomes clear that (c) "the Christian faith is an eschatological reality which sets all life within the framework of an ultimate claim."<sup>4</sup>

Such a program is culturally menacing by reason of its finalistic and exclusivistic claims.<sup>5</sup> It is menacing as over against Tillich's theological method of correlating the cultural questions with theological answers, for example, as well as against Tillich's "steadfast refusal to

2. *The Rationality of Faith* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Cf. *Worldly Theology, The Hermeneutical Focus of an Historical Faith* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), Chapters XI and XII.

accept any beliefs that produce a theology of exclusion."<sup>6</sup> It is menacing also as over against any definition of culture as open as that of Matthew Arnold:

... culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know ... the best that has been thought and said in the world, and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.<sup>7</sup>

Arnold's "humanism" was directed against the culture's capitulation to "science" and "fact," amongst other things; but there is in it also a criticism of theology and its closure upon dogma. The result was clear:

The Sea of Faith was once too at the full . . .

But now I only hear its melancholy, long withdrawing roar . . .

Or, to repeat his earlier well-known quatrain:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead

The other powerless to be born,

With nowhere yet to rest my head

With these on earth I wait forlorn.

The "dead" world Arnold specified in other contexts:

There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.<sup>8</sup>

What was still latent in the culture-consciousness a hundred and twenty-five years ago is everywhere patent today, such that today we stand *radically* between the times — between the "gods that have fled" and "the god that is coming" (Heidegger), in a time when we must break through the plane of faith and dogma and seek to establish our dialogue on "an entirely new plane, where perhaps the innermost core of man's mind, as we usually understand it, should also be broken through" (Nishitani).

Michalson's work shows an increasing awareness of this cultural hiatus. The only question is whether he saw it radically enough. Paraphrasing Heidegger (above), he notes in his last work that "we live between the time of the theology which no longer makes sense to us and the time of a theology which has not yet clearly dawned."<sup>9</sup> Because of this, a theology written in our time will be "modest" and "confused"; it will "decline to be systematic" and will be "frag-

6. Rollo May, *Paulus, Reminiscences of a Friendship* (New York, Harper & Row, 1972), p. 99.

7. *Culture and Anarchy*, p. xi.

8. "The Study of Poetry."

9. *Worldly Theology*, p. 19.

mentary, rash, and even chaotic."<sup>10</sup> Michalson's theology, we hasten to say, was none of these. Certainly it was not modest. He sought a methodology to place over against the substantialistic metaphysics of classical intellectualisms by means of which Christian meanings have been traditionally construed. Hence his historiographical methodology (his "theology as history"). This he also placed over against prominent forms of contemporary American theology, namely, "process" theology, hermeneutical theology, secularizing theology, and the "death of God" theology. By means of this methodology he sought a re-visioning of Christian understanding. This, by extension, would mean a revolutionizing of Christendom, a revolutionizing of historicity, and a revolutionizing of culture — hence culturally menacing.

Neither is Michalson's theology as history "confused." It is difficult, partly by reason of its demand that we let go of our traditional way of looking at Christian meaning in order to see it differently, and partly because we must come to it in the way in which Michalson himself came to it: that is, by an intellectual trek which began where the Barth-Bultmann axis set the theological problematic and subsequently underwent successive mutations through existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutical theology, to a new sense of the *eschaton*. Here, abandoning "direct Christology" (and following Gogarten, Bonhoeffer, and Merleau-Ponty), "God delivers up his rule to men," who, through sonship, are responsible "for bringing the world to expression as creation."<sup>11</sup> There are also accretions from other points of view (e.g., the somewhat cursory inclusions of the language problem) which do not always relate easily to these perspectives, and there are elements in these perspectives which remain incompatible and unresolved *vis-à-vis* the shifting context of the whole; and while it is true that at one stage he viewed his work as a prolegomenon to systematic theology, his more ultimate aim was "a totalizing operation within a highly complex historical process."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as his work matured, it became increasingly systematic. So much, indeed, is this the case that it is possible to say

When the blackbird flew out of sight

It marked the edge

Of one of many circles.

This suggests that his work was in some sense complete. Obviously it was not so in terms of systematic statement of a "totalistic" kind. But a projection of the lines already drawn and the decisions already made points to a fairly precise, if somewhat intransigent, point of view. Whether this point of view retains its relevance for religious concern today is a more difficult question. Richard Rubinstein once remarked that Tillich "had spoken for and to his time, but

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

we have moved beyond that time." Tillich himself was aware of this: "I am determined too much by the present *kairos*." But Rollo May, who cites these remarks, notes most pertinently: "... the real question is, on what level does he find his *kairos*?"<sup>13</sup> It is much the same with Michalson's work. Certainly we have moved beyond his time. Religiously and culturally speaking, we have moved beyond his problematic. He was very much determined by his time's *kairos*, and probed it unceasingly. Our question must be, at what level did he find his *kairos*.

The answer to this question, if it is to be found at all, will be found, I think, at the edges of his circle — at those points, that is, where he made his crucial decisions.

These points are chiefly five in number.

The first is the decision to situate theology "between the times," as we have noted above. The second is the choice between his early espousal of existentialism and his progressive refusal of it. The third is the choice between "nature" and "history." The fourth is that between "ontology" and "meaning." The fifth is that between "penultimate" and "ultimate" mysticism.

## II

The initial key, as noted above, is the placing of theology "between the times." The "times," however, are construed as between two *theological* epochs — the traditional mode of explicating the faith and a newer mode now being explored. The demise of Christendom *as such*, or the passing of the "western" orientation for life and thought, is not brought into question here, not even in the guise of the Nietzschean "death of God" or the cultural recognition that we now dwell in a post-Christian world. The *historical* possibility that we inhabit a time in which a new consciousness is being prepared is not surmised in these pages. Yet these are the precincts in which we find the contemporary problematic for the religious consciousness.

More puzzling is the attitude towards existentialism. At first espoused and assimilated to his own mode of thinking, and then used in *The Hinge of History* (the subtitle for which was "An Existential Approach to the Christian Faith"), he subsequently refuses its centrality in his thought. This he does in two steps. In the first, after having employed existential history to show the inadequacies of "world history," he asserts categorically (in *The Rationality of Faith*) that "Existentialism is the expression of the fundamental meaninglessness of existence."<sup>14</sup> In the second step, existentialism retains its utility as an approach to the Christian faith, but "in the same sense in which a porch is an approach to a house . . ." <sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to understand the first of these judgments — that

13. Paulus, p. 92.

14. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 18.

15. *Ibid.*

existentialism is the expression of the fundamental meaninglessness of existence. Certainly it was not so for Kierkegaard, nor for Jaspers, nor Chestov, nor Marcel, nor Berdyaev, nor for Heidegger: for almost none, indeed, except Sartre and possibly for some of the dramatists of the absurd. Further, existentialism "is atheistic"; it "sees only chaos"; it "calls man 'nothing.'" <sup>16</sup> These ascriptions apply perhaps to Sartre, but scarcely to the others. It is quite true, of course, that existentialism brings us up against our "boundary" or "limit" situations, exposing us to the *threat* of meaninglessness and non-being and making us aware of Pascal's (and Boehme's) "abyss." It should be noted, however, that to achieve a lucid perception of meaninglessness is in itself a meaningful act. Or, as Ionesco remarks concerning the disclosure of nothingness in his dramas: "To attack the absurdity (of the human condition) is a way of stating the possibility of non-absurdity." <sup>17</sup> Michalson accepts this, arguing that "existential history" is insofar superior to "world history," it succeeds in making plain to us the "gaps" and "cracks" in nature and in world history. But its achievement is an achievement in the realm of *possibility*: it is a way, as Ionesco says, of stating the *possibility* of non-absurdity. "Existential history," says Michalson, "suggests that man may choose to know himself in the face of the possible faithfulness at the ground of being. Existential history, however, is a movement in possibility, not in necessity." <sup>18</sup> It is through this possibility (of existential history) that man comes to know that he is "free for either nothingness or God." He is free now to interpret the "cracks in nature" as "God's presence." "Miracle is the crack in things through which the fullness of God appears, in whom all things cohere and upon whom at last all radically contingent reality rests. Belief enters when other beliefs . . . are fractured by the encounter with life." <sup>19</sup>

Clearly we have come now to the "turn" in Michalson's thinking. It involves a somewhat Kierkegaardian "leap" from "existential history" into "Biblical history" and from thence into "eschatological history." The nature of the "turn" we may defer for the moment, but the "leap" cannot be passed over.

The nature of the leap is pretty well declared in his metaphor of existentialism as the "porch" which serves merely as an "approach" to the "house." "The Christian does not live on the porch and the existentialist does not enter the house without ceasing to be an existentialist." <sup>20</sup> Was not Kierkegaard, or Berdyaev, or Marcel, or Unamuno yet an existentialist when he was a Christian? This, for Michal-

16. *The Hinge of History, An Existential Approach to the Christian Faith* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 51.

17. Cf. Richard Coe, *Ionesco* (New York, Grove Press, Inc., 1961), p. 65.

18. *The Hinge of History*, p. 73.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 77.

20. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 18.



son, would be a "contradiction." But the contradiction may be in Michalson: in his contradictory attempt, that is, to keep one foot in the "human situation" and the other in doctrine. The "porch" might well be *any* mode of approach — existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutical analysis, etc. — and the "house" that citadel of traditional dogma which lies, by definition, beyond the reach of reflective analysis. This analogy may well be the unrecognized "hinge" upon which Michalson's theology really turns. It may well be that Hegel's insight that the Incarnation is "the hinge of universal history" and that all subsequent history is but the protracted development of its consequences is the ostensible clue to this theology. This possibility must in any case be kept in mind as we note the lines which are drawn between "nature" and "history," between "ontology" and "meaning," and between "penultimate" and "ultimate" mysticism.

What Michalson intends by the above analogy is succinctly expressed in his summary statement: "Existentialism is the *expression* of the fundamental meaninglessness of existence. The Christian faith is just the opposite, the *revelation* of fundamental meaning."<sup>21</sup>

This is by all odds the best single statement of Michalson's theological position. It repeats the formula of Pascal, whose apologetic strategy consisted in contrasting "the misery of man without God" with the "happiness of man with God." Kierkegaard's strategy is the same, only he has elaborated the existential structures with dialectical care, in his theory of the "stages" and in his insistence that the truth (or meaning) that we seek is not truth in the abstract but truth which is truth for me. The same existential alternatives were set forth by Luther in his observation that "man has always either God or an idol (Gott oder Abgott)," and by the Apostle Paul when he remarks (Rom. 14:23) that "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" — a thoroughly existentialist notion. We must therefore examine with some care the move which Michalson's theology now makes from existentialism to "history."<sup>22</sup>

### III

It is first of all necessary to note the wedge that is driven between "nature" and "history." I place these terms in quotation marks because Michalson's use of them is a matter of definition. "Nature . . . is the world in so far as it is silent about the meaning of man. History is the world in so far as the question about the possibility of a meaningful life is opened up."<sup>23</sup> Nature and history are two struc-

21. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

22. In *The Hinge of History* (p. 224), Michalson has made very generous reference to my early work, *The Crisis of Faith* (1944), as "a pioneer in the discussion of Christian communication in historical categories." I should prefer to think of it as a discussion of communication and the historical in existential categories; and its "model" for history is cast in the "Divine Comedy" mode of the "Interlude" — a paraphrastic mythologem based on "Alice and the White Knight."

23. *The Hinge of History*, p. 31.

tures of reality, so different as to have "nothing in common. They are incommensurable."<sup>24</sup> *Nature is "the structure of reality exterior to and silent about man. . . . History is the structure of reality interior to and vocal about man."*<sup>25</sup> "Nature" would seem to be confined to the measurable and the instrumental — to the lump, the scalpel, the test-tube, the telescopic camera, the Cartesian object as radically disjunct from the Cartesian subject.

Given the case, then, of exclusion by definition, it is difficult to find fault with what follows in Michalson's thinking. Langdon Gilkey protested that on board ship he often found more meaning on deck in the presence of the sea and the stars than he did in the ship's lounge with the passengers, arguing thereby that nature, too, is a structure of reality in which meaning can be experienced, whereas there was precisely an absence of meaning amongst the people, the supposed structure of history. But Michalson regards this as a useful illustration

. . . in demonstrating what a specialized connotation I intend for "nature" and "history." Nature is the structure of reality in which the question of meaning is not raised. Therefore, peopled places *can* be nature. History is the structure of reality where the question of meaning is raised. Therefore, being in the presence of stars and the sea *can* be history.<sup>26</sup>

Now this is enormously facile, but it pretty well washes out any useful distinction between nature and history, while at the same time it dramatizes how very special indeed is the "connotation" being placed upon the terms in question.

We must not, however, dismiss the argument too quickly. It is evident that the question really being raised here is the question as to the nature of *meaning*. By jettisoning "nature" as a source for theological meaning, Michalson puts himself in a position to dismiss the traditional claims of the cosmological argument, as well as those analogical arguments of classical metaphysics derived from the same. It also permits him to qualify his historiographical methodology away from both classical ontologies and the modern "objective" sciences in order to begin with the radical contingencies of the human situation: that is, with "history." It is through history that meaning is disclosed. There is no approach to "being" that is not radically qualified by history. Nevertheless one must feel a little wistful about losing "nature" even for the sake of "history." As the poet says,

I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,

24. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 24.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

Surely something must be said here on behalf of the poet; for while Michalson acknowledges that meaning may be found in our experiences of nature, these experiences with their implications are effectually dropped from consideration in Michalson's analysis of meaning. "Nature" is mainly thought of in the eighteenth and nineteenth century scientific manner, or as Cartesian matter or extension. There is no place here for Wordsworth's sense of "something far more deeply interfused," or for the pre-Socratic notion of *physis* which, in Heraclitus, for example, is related intimately with *logos*. Analogies such as that of Addison, in his hymn based on the 19th Psalm, are virtually dispensed with:

The spacious firmament on high  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,  
Their great Original proclaim.

But more deeply, what Buber calls, "the mystery of the self-evident" is missed, as well as the inwardness of nature that Rilke knew:

The world is large,  
but in us  
it is deep as the sea.

It is important to note that it is not the "aesthetic" that is missing (though that also drops away); it is the *mysterium tremendum*, the primary wonder at the world, itself the mark of the religious sensibility.

More knowing would he bend the willows' branches  
who has experienced the willows' roots. (Rilke)

There is, however, another aspect to Michalson's view of history. It is his turn from existentialism to phenomenology. It is phenomenology that "differentiates approaches to history from approaches to nature," and which shows these two approaches to be "radically immiscible" — a recognition that "affects the very structure of reason." Michalson himself stresses the importance of this turn: "... I have fastened myself to those phenomenologists most influenced by the late, more historical writings of phenomenology's founder, Edmund Husserl. I refer above all to Jean-Paul Sartre and the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty."<sup>27</sup> It is this turn that is crucial to an understanding of what Michalson was about; it is this also which makes plain the distinction between "nature" and "history," and which relates these terms to the question as to how things mean.

#### IV

We note initially that, in this view, "reason and rationality are functions of contexts." "Truth" becomes relative to the context in

which it is held, and "meanings shift when the contexts shift."<sup>28</sup> "Nature" belongs to the context of "objectivity," "detachment," the world of objects understood as the impersonal substratum set over against us. "History," on the other hand, pertains to the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), the world of experience and subjective concern. The former aims at explanation and verification; the latter is perpetually a matter of interpretation. The failure of western metaphysics would lie in its effort to explore "reality" on the model of "nature" — objectively and systematically. "History" brackets all of that out of its methodology in order to interpret its data in the way most meaningful for men and women. Nothing in history, therefore, "is 'literally' so, for history involves meaning, meaning involves interpretation, and interpretation involves hermeneutical risk."<sup>29</sup> This is true equally for faith as for history. In neither case can anything be known apart from an act of interpretation. Interpretation, meanwhile, is dependent upon two things: the first is our "pre-understanding" (the conditioning via tradition and conventional modes of seeing to which we are all subject); the second, that there are only frames of reference within which meaning can be ascertained. It is within and by way of these frames of reference that interpretation takes place. In applying this to theological understanding, Michalson asserts that "there are only frames of reference within which what was once meaningful for someone else becomes meaningful for you through your acts of interpretation."<sup>30</sup>

It is just here, of course, that our parable of the blackbirds is most in evidence. There are thirteen ways certainly of looking at a blackbird. It is this lesson which Michalson has learned so well from Merleau-Ponty.

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.

It was a small part of the pantomime.

For Merleau-Ponty our experience is always perspectival, and, as such, always incomplete. But we "are condemned to meaning"; that is, we are always in the business of making sense out of our experience, and we are always running the risk that our sense so achieved will, through a shift in perspective, lapse into non-sense. In precisely the same way "history" is perspectival; it is always the achieved result of interpretation from particular points of view. As Husserl put it, in its historical situation mankind always lives within a framework of some sort of attitude.<sup>31</sup> We come into life as though "thrown" into it (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Michalson); or, to appropriate a happy analogy from Kenneth Burke; it is like coming into a room for the first time in which a high society soirée is already

28. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

29. *Worldly Theology*, p. 6.

30. *The Hinge of History*, pp. 6-7.

31. *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, translated with notes and Introduction by Quentin Lauer (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), p. 165.

in progress; conversation is already going on everywhere about a hundred different topics; it is some time before I become "oriented" to the situation and get the gist of what is being said and what is going on. Yet my sense of this is always partial and incomplete, and it is in terms of the paradigms and mores already accepted by this society.

Reflections of this sort have led Merleau-Ponty to assert "the radical subjectivity of all our experience as [being] inseparable from its truth value."<sup>32</sup> The truth values are paradigmatic, and appear as Gestalts within the interpretive frameworks of given communities, almost like a kaleidoscopic unity of form — which works very well until the kaleidoscope is shaken, or as long as the paradigm is mutually consented to and mainly taken for granted. When a new model is introduced, or a new theory, or a new paradigm, or a new framework supervenes, it can rarely if ever be assimilated as merely an additional datum which may be added to all the others; it necessitates rather a re-visioning of the whole and a reconstruction of all prior data.

I have stressed this matter of framework, its radical subjectivity, and the constant modulation of its paradigms, because it is just here that what is most radically innovative in Michalson's theology appears, as it is also the point, as one would expect, where it is most vulnerable. That is, taking history as his model for the doing of theology, and seeing the implicit relation of history's meaning to framework, interpretation, and hermeneutical risk, he immediately gains something and loses something. What he gains is his immediate release from the objectivist metaphysics of classical interpretation, and the splendid risk of reconstructing the whole of Christian tradition from a fresh point of view. What he loses — in a time between the times — is openness to other re-visionings that may be going on at still deeper levels of the time's *kairos*. Or, as Thomas Kuhn has said, in relation to comparable revolutions in the field of science, "One must go native, discover that one is thinking and working in, *not simply translating out of*, a language that was previously foreign." The transition that is here called for cannot be made simply by willing to make it. Instead, as Kuhn says,

... at some point ... he finds that the transition has occurred, that he has slipped into the new language without a decision having been made. Or else ... he finds himself fully persuaded of the new view but nevertheless unable to internalize it and be at home in the world it helps to shape. Intellectually such a man has made his choice, but the conversion required if it is to be effective eludes him. He may use the new theory nonetheless, but he will do so as a foreigner in a foreign environment, an alternative available to him only because there are natives already there. His work is parasitic on theirs, for he lacks the

32. *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated with a Preface by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 93.



constellation of mental sets which future members of the community will acquire through education.<sup>33</sup>

This is a remarkable description of the innovator's dilemma, a dilemma almost inevitable in a time between the times when the former frameworks are breaking up; in such a time thinkers are perhaps necessarily parasitic on one another. What is important is that the thinker must risk his thought, based as it is upon the intuitions of change that are everywhere being spoken in the prophetic community of which his thinking makes him a part. "One must go native!" That is, one must let go — let go altogether — of the former framework; one must step back ("to see the light that is under one's feet"); one must step down into the time's abyss, its *kairos*; and one must step through the opposites that are radically in contention into the realm where all things become new.

What happens in Michalson's work will be seen now in the "leap" which it makes in relation to the frames of reference, when he carries his historiographical method over into theology. This is stated quite bluntly in his last work.

These, then, are the two most important methodological facets of theology as history. First, it is theology resolved to make no statements about reality which do not involve the question of the meaning of man's existence. Second, it is theology resolved to import no criteria into the interpretation of the Biblical faith which the Bible itself does not itself supply or confirm. It will read the Bible as history. Two consequences for theology flow directly from these resolutions. One is that in theology as history there will be no norms and authorities. There will be only a frame of reference, that being the Bible and its hermeneutical aid, the history of its interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

Again, in an earlier volume, he wrote:

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms . . . that there is a place in history to which one may point with the assurance that "There God is." That place is Jesus Christ . . . where Jesus Christ is present, history has a future, for it is filled with ultimate possibility.<sup>35</sup>

And again, in the later volume, in a rare reference to contemporary psychology:

Jung . . . anticipates a day when the universality of historico-religious symbols will be achieved by a movement toward trans-historical archetypal symbols . . . Christians find, on the other hand, that the naming of God is not a matter of indifference. "The God and father of our Lord

33. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 204.

34. *Worldly Theology*, p. 219.

35. *The Hinge of History*, pp. 140-141.

Jesus Christ" is a God who makes himself known. That is the ultimacy in which Christians are involved. Furthermore, the God whom Jesus names makes himself known not beyond or beneath our individual histories, but within them. That indicates the *historical* ultimacy of the Christian's archetype. Historical mediation is of the essence of a faith in which it is believed that God is present in history.<sup>36</sup>

And how does one come to this belief? Through "decision":

In decision one consents that this moment of interpretation is the moment of lucidity in which he is brought to existence.<sup>37</sup>

"The general form of propositions is: This is how things are." — That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.<sup>38</sup>

The above quotations raise this question about Michalson's prolegomena to the doing of theology. Is he merely tracing round the traditional theological frame again, and one time more — existentially, phenomenologically, hermeneutically, etc. — looking through it again without radically modifying it? "A picture held us captive," says Wittgenstein again. "And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."<sup>39</sup>

The second observation is, that nowhere in Michalson's writing are the presuppositions of the modern Cartesian ego broken through. The unconscious framework, operative in his language, retains a framework of rationalistic presuppositions. It is, in a sense, broken through by the intentionality of consciousness — that man is a being always "oriented towards all things but not residing in any" (Merleau-Ponty), or that in thinking, man always intends an object. But here too the ego is not broken through. All such philosophical or theological locutions, no matter how innovative in other respects, only succeed in concealing further the fundamental problematic contained in the very mode of existence of the modern ego. The ego is not the whole psyche. It substitutes mind for soul and sets itself up as the center of control and would legislate its own destiny, thereby ignoring or over-riding the concerns of the deep psyche.

36. *Worldly Theology*, pp. 188-189.

37. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 101.

38. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958), § 114, p. 48<sup>e</sup>.

39. *Ibid.*, § 115.

After its fashion, the appeal to theology as *history* is an unconscious attempt to deliver theological language and its literalistic propositional mode from just this intellectualistic pattern. "History" confers upon theological method unwittingly the metaphorical mode and the movement and vitality of the "storial" form. This is basically a mythopoeic mode.

There are four points at which Michalson appears to grasp this (though the insights, as Kuhn suggests, remain "foreign").

In his early writing there occurs the altogether crucial statement: "Thought first discovered its freedom in its movement from metaphorical meanings to literal meanings. That was the movement of science. Thought now confirms and constitutes its freedom in the movement from the literal to the higher metaphorical. That is the movement of history."<sup>40</sup> This all-important insight is allowed to lapse. The proximity of history to art, however, becomes clearer as the work unfolds. In *The Rationality of Faith* we read, "Science copies. Art creates. History interprets."<sup>41</sup> In *Worldly Theology* we are told, "History... is a reality more like art than like science... For one thing, history like art creates a meaningful world for us."<sup>42</sup> Again, in the move from "existential history" to "Biblical history" he appropriates from Eric Vögelin the notion of "paradigmatic events" — summary events (e.g., Jacob's wrestle with the angel) which "determine the meaning of all other events."<sup>43</sup> Such events function as paradigms because they are in fact *mythologems* and break through the common literalistic consciousness. They do this because of their imaginal and archetypal forms. They succeed in breaking through both our doctrinal and conventional compliance and reach into the *archai* of the deep psyche. It is quite appropriate then, following Kierkegaard, that in a theology as history Jesus as the Christ should be presented as the Paradigm of paradigms. "Kierkegaard had seen something which, if true, shattered Christendom's customary mold. Jesus of Nazareth... came as the paradigm by which a whole new mode of existence was to be inflected."<sup>44</sup> Yet Michalson does not quite do this. His view of Biblical history is not sufficiently *dramatic* to acknowledge the cumulative force of its positive and negative event on the Cross. A Paradigm of paradigms would not be simply a larger archetypal summation event; it would have to be that moment in such a way as that the opposites are reconciled. It would thus be a recapitulatory event (Irenaeus), and a restorative

40. *The Hinge of History*, p. 73.

41. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 96.

42. *Worldly Theology*, p. 81.

43. *The Hinge of History*, p. 40.

44. *Worldly Theology*, p. 115; cf. p. 123.

event, effecting the purgation of the sins and sufferings of the world.<sup>45</sup>

This is not, however, Michalson's view. All Christology is subordinated to the metaphor of the *eschaton*. "Eschatology is the knowledge that the sort of reality which comes to expression because of Christ is reality in its final form . . ." <sup>46</sup> It is not apocalypticism, which is both a-historical and anthropocentric. Eschatology is the horizon within which statements concerning Christ are made, which means that soteriology is subordinated to history and its call for a change of orientation toward the world. This new orientation is the inauguration of God's kingdom.

When God inaugurates a new age he puts all prior history in question. But he does so by mercifully setting up the framework for a wholly new basis for life, an entirely new history.<sup>47</sup>

This new framework is the horizon of eschatological consciousness.

The end of the "world" to which eschatology refers is the end of the world which occurs when, through his symbolic action and his parabolic speech, Jesus of Nazareth exposes the life of man to the horizon of God's imminent kingdom, giving man a whole new mode of being-in.<sup>48</sup>

Stripped of its theological jargon this means that what is primary in the Christian faith is the "proclamation" of the Kingdom, and that this is communicated in two ways: by the symbolic actions of Jesus and by the strategy of his speaking in parables. The mythopoeic element in these strategies, or the fact that the eschatological "horizon" thus proposed and thus defined is a symbolic framework is not acknowledged. The horizon remains "historical":

Under the parabolic proclamation of Jesus, the truth of the *eschaton* is an historical truth. That means that the truth does not inhere in the correspondence of propositions with the things they signify. Parabolic propositions are not words which signify things. The words are the things. . . . Parabolic truth inheres in the events in which words bring to expression a new world, a new history, a newly-qualified consciousness.<sup>49</sup>

The importance which language now assumes is evident, and once again the term "history" is compelled to carry too much baggage. Language is the horizon in which life is illuminated, as Michalson held in *The Rationality of Faith*. For Michalson such language is

45. But cf. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 134, where this view is considered. "History, however, is not a histrionic but a kerygmatic art" (p. 89).

46. *Worldly Theology*, p. 205.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

"presentational" and "performatory." "What it says to us it effects in us."<sup>50</sup>

I should like to concur in this; but I cannot do so without appealing beyond "history" to *poiesis* and the ontology implicit in this move. There is a level at which expression creates being. It is achieved through images which, as Bachelard has put it, "have touched the depths before stirring the surface." It results from those images which, having effected the step back from the clichés of conventional thinking, have suffered the step down, either through confrontation of the "abyss" or through learning how to "await the new name of God" (Hölderlin); and thence making the step through, which is the step signified by Pierre-Jean Jouve when he writes that "Poetry is a soul inaugurating a form." The Kingdom of the New Testament is precisely this region (or regioning) of the new being. When this dialectic in depth does not occur, language as "performatory" or the Gospel "proclamation" remains magical and devoid of the new being. Michalson's category of "decision" does not reflect this dialectic of transformation, though it is probable that the eschatologists among contemporary theologians are unwittingly leaning into this mythopoeic mode of speaking by way of the metaphors of the eschaton and the kingdom.

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

In Michalson's language the inflections are those of traditional theology, and the innuendoes do not resonate either into or from the deep psyche where authentic transformation takes place. The reason, I suspect, is that "history," deprived of its ontological source, tends always to be literal; and, in things of the spirit, the literal is the enemy. Literalism is of the ego, not of the deep psyche or soul. The forcing of the mythopoeic symbol into doctrinal compliance turns the experience outward, and objectivizes: religion (theology) becomes an ideology, which is a literal mode of the mind. Mythopoesis — or, in this case, theopoesis — leads us into meaning by taking us out of the objectivizing mode of seeing. It leads into what Philip Wheelwright has called a liminal ontology, or a metaphysics of the threshold, where "we are never quite *there*, we are always and deviously on the verge of being there." He then remarks that "all dogmas whether theological or scientific in kind, represent man's usual struggle to erect mental barriers against the unsettling fact of that incurably 'not quite' condition of existence."<sup>51</sup> In a similar vein, James Hillman notes that the mythic revelation confirms rather

50. The Rationality of Faith, p. 149.

51. Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain, A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington & London, Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 272.

than removes these existential ambiguities. Instead of certainties, "we hover in puzzlement at the border where the true depths are. Rather than an increase of certainty there is a spread of mystery."<sup>52</sup> Yet paradoxically I am sustained by this, as it were, "from below." "The more profoundly archetypal my experiences of soul, the more I recognize how they are beyond me, presented to me, a present, a gift, even while they feel my most personal possession."<sup>53</sup> It is necessary to move "from history to mystery."<sup>54</sup>

## V

It has been pointed out that the model in our thinking creates the case before us.<sup>55</sup> A framework must be taken therefore as a symbolic form, or as a metaphor. There are at least thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. If I choose one to the exclusion of others I fall under the censorship of the poet.

O thin men of Haddam, (O ye of little faith!)  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

The mystery lies in the common particulars of experience, in the blackbird that walks around our feet. Our culture no longer trusts our "golden" dreams with their exclusivistic claims.

A graduate student in a seminar reported the following dream. A "voice" said to her:

When you hear God  
Pay no attention  
For it is only his nose  
Scraping along the floor.  
But when you *see* God  
You know it's true, because  
It's framed in Indian beadwork.<sup>56</sup>

Carl Jung has reported that in the dreams of his patients nothing appears at the center of our mandalas. In former times it would have been the figure of Christ. Others have been learning from Taoism that the Tao that can be named is not the true Tao; or from Zen

Though we do not preach the doctrine,  
Unasked the flowers bloom in the spring . . .<sup>57</sup>

52. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), p. 142.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

54. Norman O. Brown, *Closing Time* (New York, Vintage Books, Random House, 1973), p. 103.

55. James Hillman, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

56. Used by permission of Ms. Linda Sexson.

57. Ikkyu (1394-1481); quoted in Conrad Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1973), p. 125.



These are all modes of contemporary mysticism . . . And the western (American) poet either laments,

I am still begging the same question

By the same light,

Eating the same stone<sup>58</sup>

Or he has learned that

A mind too active is no mind at all;

The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone . . .<sup>59</sup>

While all of these witnesses to the mystery of things might be included (by definition) in Michalson's view of "history" they would have to fall under the rubric of "penultimate mysticism." He was deeply influenced by a statement of Arthur Koestler's: "The ultimate truth is penultimately always a falsehood."<sup>60</sup> Michalson argues quite convincingly that existentialism is a mysticism, not a humanism; but due to its reticence to name the God, it remains a penultimate mysticism. The transition from penultimate to ultimate mysticism "is evoked when the Christian witnesses to the presence of God in Christ."<sup>61</sup> Because Michalson must retain Christ as the unique point where God speaks in history, he must also hold that there is no immediate relation between God and men. The mysticism where such a relation is witnessed to witnesses therefore to penultimate truth (which, à la Koestler, is a falsehood). But we are today, being culturally between the times, thrown back increasingly upon this witness, the presentation of Christ in traditional theology having somehow failed. Michalson's attempt to correct this through a theology as history seems still to leave Christ on the outside, thereby blocking the way into the Kingdom, and thus being constrained to an unintended penultimacy. Clearly Michalson does not intend this; but his eschatology, despite the argument from history, remains awkwardly trapped in the systematic theological model.

There is an uncharted and unassimilated line in Christian history that sees the Kingdom's existential paradox quite clearly. We find it in Augustine, "Thou wert with me but I was not with Thee"; in Eckhart, "God is nearer to me than I am to myself"; in Nicolas of Cusa, "Nor could any turn unto Thee wert Thou not already at hand"; in Pascal, "Thou wouldst not be seeking me hadst thou not already found me"; in Hölderlin, "That which thou seekest is near,/ And already coming to meet thee."

It is also at the center of Kierkegaard's vision. Kierkegaard distinguishes between a first self — ego-centered, outward acting, aggressive, progressively emptying itself — and a deeper self, which discovers to the ego that *of itself* it can do nothing.

58. W.S. Merwin, *The Moving Target* (New York, Atheneum, 1967), p. 33, "Another Year Come."

59. Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 244, "Infirmary."

60. *The Hinge of History*, p. 118.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Then God is with him, coming more quickly than the light that penetrates the darkness, swifter than the thought that dispels the fog; present as promptly as only He can be, *who was already there*.<sup>62</sup>

Then Kierkegaard distinguishes between two kinds of wonder. There is a first wonder, which arises out of our sense of the need for God, when we become seekers for the place where God is. This is the beginning of all deeper understanding. But it passes over into striving and all is lost. Whereupon the second wonder becomes possible, when the first wonder is lost through striving.

... when the human being perishing in his despair discovers that *he already has* what he sought, ... that the thing sought is given, that it is in the possession of him who stands there and loses it in his misunderstanding: this arouses the wonder of the whole man.<sup>63</sup>

And so it is with this second wonder, it changes the seeker, and by this change he comes to seek something different, indeed the very opposite; for now seeking means [that] the seeker is himself changed. He no longer looks for the *place* where the thing sought is concealed, for this is exactly within him; nor does he look for the *place* where God is, he does not *strive* there, for God is with him, *very near* him, near him everywhere, omnipresent in every moment, but he shall be changed so that he may in truth become the place where God dwells ... Was it not a fearful thing, my reader, that the object of your seeking was so near you that you did not seek God, but God sought you?<sup>64</sup>

Contemporary literature has been discovering this simple secret. It is what T. S. Eliot intends when, in *Ash Wednesday*, he speaks of "the desert in the garden the garden in the desert." W. H. Auden, in his *Christmas Oratorio*, notes that there is nothing but the garden, nothing but the miracle. And Kafka, in one of those wonderfully wise and gnomic aphorisms, tells us that "The positive is already given; our task is to accomplish the negative." The Gospel according to Thomas says that "the Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth and men do not see it" (Log. 114).

This is the inflection that I miss in this theology as history. Its entanglement with doctrine omits the passage of the "dark night of the soul" — itself a metaphor for transformation in depth. The historical mode of seeing does not reflect the wisdom of this acceptance. Much of the historical thesis could be salvaged if the turn were made from theo-logic to theopoesis; but the imaginal language of

62. Soren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses*, translated by David F. and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), Vol. IV, p. 43. Italics mine.

63. Soren Kierkegaard, *Thoughts on Crucial Situations in Human Life*, translated by David F. Swenson (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1941), p. 19.

64. *Ibid.* pp. 19-20. Italics mine.

theopoesis necessarily remains open, its metaphorical mode prevents the forcing of the Kingdom into tradition's dogmatic mold. The appeal to "history" is a bold and venturesome attempt to do this, to translate Christian meaning out of its stratified and fixated forms, but, since the depth dialectic is not grasped either in its personal or historical forms, the ego fallacy remains dominant through the taking up of the symbolic and archetypal themes into the ego once again. Michalson was himself aware of the irony involved in theological risk; theologians generally fall short of their aims. "God is set aside," he quotes from Bultmann, "not by denying him but by affirming him in the wrong way."<sup>65</sup> But Michalson's work has in any case asked the right question: have we not been looking at God and the Christian message in the wrong way? Michalson has indeed said that we must let God be, and that is quite right, exactly right — yet it is a strange thing (but mythopoetically, not so strange) that theologies have so treated Christ as to make of him, not the one who mediates God to us, but one who stands between us blocking the way. Michalson recognized that Christ is in order to the Kingdom, theologically speaking. His metaphor of the *eschaton* is intended to establish that; it is through the eschaton that life in the Kingdom becomes the mode of man's existence in the world. But again the language turns outward before it transforms us inwardly.

Again, Michalson speaks of God as "the being which is the very power of being, conferring on all reality its possibility. . . . 'the possibility of' . . . is the symbolic way of saying that the affirmation of the reality of God cannot be deduced from the conditions of history."<sup>66</sup> This again is well said. But then it reverses the initial decision about history: namely, that being does not qualify history, but history qualifies being. The ontological mouse in Tiny Alice's eschatological castle has crept in again through the Rilkean gaps or cracks in things.

But is there then no answer to this riddle? Is there perhaps a fourteenth blackbird hidden behind *all* of our many ways of perceiving, of *looking at* the blackbird? Of course there is, as the poet well knows:

A man and a woman

Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird

Are one.

It is the mystery of identity and difference. Rilke, in his *Letters*, put it most graphically. Perhaps we have been wrong, he said, in trying to *look at* God; whereas we should be trying to see as he sees. In which case he would be behind us. We would not be looking at him, but would be looking in the direction in which he is looking. We would be seeing as he is seeing. That is why God remains hidden; it is also

65. *The Hinge of History*, p. 124.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

the way in which we may enter into his creative enterprise. It is also the reason why God cannot be conceptualized, why there is always the God beyond "God." And it is why the ego must let go and become open to the "deep Self," to the "source," to the "root," to the "ground of being," and let "God" be his is-ness through us.

I have suggested that, from the standpoint of our cultural setting, Michalson's theology marks the edge of one of many circles; that I sense an equivocation in his theology as history between his aim to revise theological methodology via theology as "history" and the vocational retention beneath this model of the classical dispositions (and implicit framework) of doctrines; that this is instructive of what remains unsaid (though partially glimpsed) in his experiment: namely, that theology as talk about God (or gods) is intrinsically theopoesis; that it is necessarily dependent upon the as-structures of knowing and their anagogy in depth; and that a consistent theopoesis reverses our usual systematic conceptual mode of thinking and seeing; which would imply that Christ always occurs wherever the antinomies of human experience negatively collide and impale themselves upon God — the positive that is already given.

Meanwhile,

The river is moving.

The blackbird must be flying.

It was surely by the river bank that the following parable was spoken:

The wise man said: "In the middle of the night, while all things were wrapped in silence, a secret word was spoken to me." It came stealthily, like a thief. What does he mean by a word that is secret or hidden? It is the nature of a word to reveal what is hidden. "It opened and shone before me as if it were revealing something and made me conscious of God, and thus it was called 'a word.' Further-more it was not clear to me what it was, because it came with stealth like a whisper trying to explain itself through stillness." See! As long as it is concealed, men will always be after it. It appears and disappears, which means that we shall plead and sigh for it.

Perhaps the real center and enigma of Christian understanding lies in the injunction:

Seek — and ye shall find

Knock — and it shall be opened unto you

Ask — and ye shall receive.

# God and the Absurd

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## I

Carl Michalson described his theological standpoint as "a theology of history." The meaning of the word "history" in this case is not that of looking for historical facts in the past but rather that of treating history as the place where man creates his own future in dialogue with the surroundings. That is, history is understood as the life creating place where man is always demanded to make decisions. Michalson thinks of history as the opposite of nature. I know of no theologian who distinguished history from nature so sharply as Michalson did. For him nature is that which man can observe and grasp objectively and which does not demand of man a life creating posture. The meaning of life is not questioned in nature, since the meaning of life is raised only where the question of how to create one's own future becomes the crucial issue for man. But is faith related only to decision making as Michalson said? Correspondingly, is history as the place of decision the sole object of theological thought? Rather, is it not the case that theology should understand God as the One who unites nature and history in such a way as to retain the gap between them and at the same time to include both within Himself? If that be the case, we cannot avoid dealing with what traditional theology has called the problem of evil. Furthermore, if we think theologically from the viewpoint of Michalsonian existentialist theology, we can think of God only in such a way that our existential question will get an answer from Him. Correspondingly, our understanding of evil will necessarily be derived from our own relation to evil. That is, it will be derived from the fact that we cannot help rebelling against it, since God and evil are opposites in reality. In such a case, the objective concept of the existence of evil in traditional theology will be replaced by the concept of the absurd. I understand an existentialist theological methodology as one in which problems are dealt with in terms of a question and answer approach. The questions arise out of the

\*Professor Noro was a Tipple Lecturer, giving, on November 12, 1973, via video tape, a talk on the contributions to and influence of Carl Michalson on Japanese theological thinking.

existential situation of man. Such an approach is to be distinguished from existential-*ism*.

It is in order, therefore, to reconsider in this essay the problem of the relation of God and the absurd as well as some problems involving the concepts of history and nature.

Carl Michalson's understanding is based on his interpretation of the Bible. God's domination over nature is treated in the Bible only in terms of God's care of the history of Israel and of the church, and not vice versa. In other words, nature is treated from an historical point of view. Michalson's theology as history makes the following succinct decisions: first, man never expresses himself historically in any way which does not include the problem of the meaning of human existence; second, we are not to interpret the biblical faith by any criterion other than that which the Bible provides. That is, we are to interpret the Bible solely from the historical point of view.<sup>1</sup>

The clearest expression of Michalson's understanding of history is his book *The Hinge of History*. This book consists of two parts, the first of which is titled "Existential History," and the second "Eschatological History."

A. In *Existential History* he discusses man's existential question and says the answer to the question will not be given in existential history, but only in eschatological history. The eschatology mentioned here is not a mythical event at the end of the world, but an expression that the answer will be given through Jesus Christ from the dimension beyond history, as existential history has no answer within itself. Does man have any meaning at all in life? Existential history leads one to the conclusion that life is, after all, meaningless because it cannot give the final answer to that question which it itself has raised. In this sense existential thinking about history which does not allow any light from the beyond convinces us that life is meaningless without God. Consequently, Christians who believe that they have encountered God through the Christ even give up philosophical existential-*ism*, which stoically denies any light from the beyond. Instead, they affirm life! As far as a man does not believe in the Christ event, life is full of cracks through which the meaninglessness of life peeps out. But when a man believes in Christ, the meaning of life is affirmed and his life acquires rationality in this sense. The theme of Michalson's book *The Rationality of Faith* was the solution of existential problems through the illumination provided by the light from the beyond.

Michalson develops existential history as the exposition of the meaninglessness in world history. World history is that which describes events and facts of the past and is concerned with what happened. It is not interested in the meaning of these events. In the dimension of existential history attention is concentrated on the

1. Carl Michalson, "The Task of Systematic Theology," *The Centennial Review* (Spring 1964).



meaning and interpretation of these events. And, as the cracks of meaninglessness are exposed, the incompleteness of existential history becomes clear. According to Michalson, the existential question will get its answer from the eschatological dimension.

B. *Eschatological history* is the appearance of ultimate meaning through *Biblical history*. In the latter, which we usually call *Heilsgeschichte*, the key issue is God's providential domination in history. The former is *Heilsgeschehen*, which is nothing but the event of Jesus Christ. We can clearly discern in his thought at this point the influence of Bultmann. As did Bultmann, so also does Michalson interpret everything, including *Heilsgeschichte*, in terms of *Heilsgeschehen*, and not vice versa.

Jesus Christ is the event of God's addressing man and Michalson regards it as a speech event, as do Ebeling and Fuchs.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, he grasps seriously the personality of God as the personal encounter which demands of us a decision and as a history creating event. Accordingly, he thinks that traditional Christology defined by concepts of substance expresses the biblical understanding of Christ in an insufficient way.<sup>3</sup> Two-nature Christology is transformed into a confession that God's address to man and man's authentic obedience as the true response to that address took place in the earthly Jesus and that men receive therein the declaration of forgiveness of sin. That we can live a meaningful life now in spite of our sin in this fashion is nothing but the experience of the resurrected Christ.

Tillich, as well as Heinrich Ott, who is influenced by the later Heidegger, think of God ontologically and assert that the meaning of life is found in God's glorious self-manifestation through man's being. Michalson rejects such mystical thinking. The reason is that in such thought man is understood as a being for the sake of God and is not loved for himself. Ontological-mystical thinking finally obscures the personal encounter between God and man and does not treat man's history creating decision seriously.<sup>4</sup>

When we treat theology only historically in this fashion, what is the uniqueness of Christianity as compared with other religions? If we follow the Michalsonian existentialist understanding of the Gospel, it cannot be found in the speculative forms of the doctrine of the Trinity, nor in two-nature Christology, nor in the compensation or other types of atonement theory. These dogmas are not history creating messages, but only objective thought about God and Christ's personality and acts which obscure man's history creating power. Then wherein lies what we call the absoluteness of Christianity? The absoluteness of Christianity lies in the character of man's history creating act spurred by God's act in the Christ event

2. Carl Michalson *The Rationality of Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), pp. 91ff.

3. Carl Michalson, "Communicating the Gospel," *Theology Today* (October 1957).

4. Carl Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, pp. 125ff.

which authorizes the response of man in his history creating act. In other words, the absoluteness of Christianity must be understood as present in the encounter between our history creating decision and the Event of Jesus Christ, that is, his Cross and Resurrection as the Word of God.

This problem is related to the once-and-for-all-ness of Christian revelation. If we understand this as an event which took place at a certain time in world history, such once-and-for-all-ness will pass away and the history creating meaning will be lost. Rather, the uniqueness of Christianity must be sought for in what is always taking place. The once-and-for-all-ness must be understood as that which gives meaning to our existence. That is to say, we are to die on the cross in this world and to be resurrected in the encounter with the Word of God — only this is the true Word which transforms our being into true existence. Such is the meaning of the once-and-for-all-ness of the revelation. Michalson, as an existentialist theologian who understood revelation in this fashion, asserts that this kind of existentialist understanding of Christianity is not docetic. On the contrary, he thinks that docetic thought is that type which regards an event which took place at a certain time in world history, which is by nature fugitive, as the basis of the uniqueness of Christianity. According to him, the fact that Christianity is a historical religion means that the Word became flesh and this does not simply mean that Christ once lived in this world. If the historicity of Christianity only means that Christ once lived in this world, the word “flesh” does not indicate Christ’s irreplaceable being, but only a man’s fugitive and replaceable being. That Christ is historical and the Word became flesh means that Christ has come into the conditions of our life in the fullest sense so as to provide us with the conditions of eternal life. It also means the significance of all history has been disclosed in Christ. The incarnation means nothing but that we have been informed of the meaning of the whole of history and at the same time of the meaning of our life. It further means the Christ event is made flesh in my time in such a way that I am called forth to the history creating act. This is to be crucified in this world — by giving up every effort to secure by my own power any objective ground for my existence — and to be resurrected with Christ. Far from being an objective event, the resurrection is, for Michalson, an interpretation of the Cross. We understand the meaning of the Cross, accept it as the Word of God, and experience eternal life *hic et nunc* through our life depending wholly on it.<sup>5</sup> What I question in Michalson’s theology is his understanding of faith as man’s absolute passion, or so it seems to me, to create history.

Michalson would have been interested in and made much of Rinzo Shiina, a Japanese novelist, if before his untimely death he had

5. Carl Michalson, *The Hinge of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), pp. 182ff.

known of him. Shiina took part in the proletarian movement and was arrested before World War II. He earned fame as an existentialist novelist immediately after the war and was baptized in 1951. He has written, since then, many excellent novels and essays. In my opinion, the basic theme of Shiina's literature is protest against the making of anything absolute. He, accordingly, wants to make the distinction between faith and nonfaith relative. He protests the absolutizing of faith as well as the absolutizing of nonfaith. That man is simultaneously a believer and an unbeliever appears to him a humorous irony, and faith means to accept such a condition. In other words, he lacks the severity of that kind of faith which demands always successive decisions for itself and also that sense of history which necessitates such an absolute passion for faith.

Shiina's viewpoint is what I would understand as a *worldly faith*: it understands faith radically within the relativistic, historical everydayness of our existence.

Then, what is the resurrection for Shiina? He treats this problem in his essay "Did the Resurrection Take Place?" Since for him faith means for a man to bet himself on what he believes in, to believe in the Resurrection means to live gambling one's very being on the Resurrection. Then what is the meaning of the Resurrection? Shiina writes the following:

What meaning then, have I found in the Resurrection? I have found such a meaning as this — if the Resurrection is a fact for men, it must be the true salvation and freedom for men. What change have I experienced by betting on the Resurrection? I discovered that the freedom and salvation of the Resurrection have already been given to all men and that those who believe as well as those who do not believe have been included in the promise of the Kingdom of God. So, it was not necessary for me to believe in it, so to speak. However, I would not have been able to understand that I need not believe in the Resurrection, if I had not believed in it.<sup>6</sup>

The freedom and salvation of the Resurrection are so clear to Shiina that man need not believe in it expressly; or to say the same thing in other words, Shiina has bet on it decisively. Such understanding of the Resurrection suggests that it is rather natural that there can be those who do not believe in it, though it is also natural that there can also be those who believe in it, insofar as the problem of the Resurrection is treated on the level of whether a man can believe in it or not. Shiina believes in the Resurrection. But at the same time, he agrees with those who do not believe in it and he says that he is one of those who cannot believe. The Resurrection is so clear and so self-evident that it allows such a situation. The Resur-

6. Rinzo Shiina, "Fukkatsu wa aru ka," *Chiteideno Sampo* (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1966), pp. 49ff.

rection has to do with such a self which can be amused at a self which within itself encompasses a believing and a disbelieving self. Shiina proposes to call the self which cannot believe the first self, and the self which is in opposition to and refuses it the second self, and, further, the self which posits the split and the opposition before itself, the third self. But the third self is real only in the first or in the second self in this historical time. Man can live only in the time to which the first self belongs or in the time to which the second self belongs. And if the two opposing times should intersect, such an intersection must be, he thinks, what we call the eternal or Heaven. But the eternal has not been made actual yet to the third self. "The eternal can live," Shiina writes, "only by diving into the first and the second times. Such is the way of our life in historical time. But the third self becomes the intersection point of the first and the second self and lives in our mind when it dives into the first and the second self. This is Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ as God's promise."<sup>7</sup> If we regard the first self as absolute, it will ridicule the self which believes. But, on the contrary, if we regard the second self as absolute, it will reproach the self which cannot believe. In such a situation there can be no freedom nor salvation for a man. The resurrected Jesus has appeared in such a fashion that we can only understand him in the twin moments of time. And He who raised Jesus as such, that is, the Jesus who is looked at by men in double image, as God. Shiina writes,

The Resurrection did not occur from the viewpoint of the first time, but occurred from the viewpoint of the second time . . . that, concerning the Resurrection, we can only say that it occurred and at the same time did not occur suggests that something which is beyond human recognition is the ground of the Resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

When Shiina says that the Resurrection did not occur in "the first time," he means precisely that it is impossible for us to discover the meaning of life in existential history. We will affirm our life just because it is full of absurdity. Otherwise, affirmation is unnecessary. When Shiina acknowledges the Resurrection in "the second time," he means, in my opinion, that it is impossible for us to live a meaningless life and that it is necessary for us to make a decision for the meaning of our life so that we may create history. The reason Shiina refuses to make the first time absolute is that such absolutizing of the "first time" does not give us the will for life and in this sense is meaningless to us. The reason Shiina refuses to make the second time absolute is that our life is full of absurdity. Our affirmation of life inevitably retains the character of "in-spite-of-ness." Believers and nonbelievers alike live with the despair of sensing that life is cracked by the absurd and that life, accordingly, *might possibly* be meaningless after all. When Shiina still says that life is based on that which is

7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

beyond the first and the second moments of time, his meaning is that his life is based on God who is active in nature and history. A man's history creating decision must become, in the depth, paradoxically, God's gift to him. Only in such a reality of life, can we avoid the absolutization of our faith and rid ourselves of understanding man's decision in legalistic terms as a law we must fulfill. It seems to me that Michalson is deficient in his doctrine of God at this point.

## II

Helmut Thielicke's book *Der Nihilismus* which was based on lectures delivered immediately after World War II when the cold wind of nihilism was blowing across Germany is very suggestive for our discussion.<sup>9</sup> That author points out that nihilism does not, as the popular usage of the word is apt to suggest, mean an epicurean life posture. He found a good example of this fact in the trials of war criminals being held by the Allied Nations in Germany at that time. The war criminals asserted that they were not guilty because they had only carried out the orders given them by their superiors. Many of these war criminals were indeed convinced of their innocence. They were very honest and discharged their duties earnestly. He refers to them as "functionaries" (*Funktionare*).<sup>10</sup> Their honest conscience was such as to perform only the assigned role within the system of the organization. They were but gears in the tremendous organization of the despotic Nazi government. This they considered their unchangeable fate and they obeyed their fate. Thielicke thinks that this attitude which made possible the war crimes is based on belief in fate, escape to objectivity, and fear of a world without God.<sup>11</sup> According to him, this is nothing but the disease called nihilism and he who is attacked by the disease "will sink from the level of objective responsibility in discharging orders."<sup>12</sup>

In explaining the honesty of this kind of nihilism and the fear which is the ground of this honesty, the author mentions Picasso's paintings as examples.<sup>13</sup> As some of Picasso's works show, the authentic organic connection between man and nature has been destroyed in the present age. Everything is analyzed and dismantled mechanically. Man and the world are treated as objects of such analysis and dreadful depersonalization comes about. Thielicke cites

9. Helmut Thielicke, *Der Nihilismus* (Tübingen: Otto Reichl Verlag, 1950) — English translation: *Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature — with a Christian Answer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

10. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 159.

Nicholas Berdyaev's comment on the situation of the present age symbolized in Picasso's works.

It [the art of Picasso] no longer seeks for the perfection of the integral man. It has, in fact, lost the faculty of integral interpretation and only strips off layer after layer in order to lay bare the inner structure of the natural being; or, penetrating ever deeper, it unearths the images of real monsters which are so vitally expressed in Picasso's canvases.<sup>14</sup>

We contemporary men have lost the harmonious integrated world symbolized in Mozart's music. That which is expressed in modern art and music is our obedience to the fate which rules over our life mechanically or accidentally, and our fear of inevitable fate. The will to trust in the fellow-man and in the world in terms of love is lacking. Our life and the world is full of fate which, without any reason, attacks us in such a dreadful fashion as that described in Albert Camus' novel *La Peste*. For these reasons, Thielicke thinks, contemporary man does not have zeal to reform society and the world so that they will become fit for human life. In such a situation, the only possibility for man is to recover a positive attitude toward fate by loving and accepting it in the way Camus has outlined in *Le Myth de Sisyphe*.<sup>15</sup>

Focusing our attention on Thielicke's understanding of nihilism as fatalistic, it seems to me, from the above discussion, that we can relate nihilism as understood by him to positivistic rationalism. For, what springs out of this kind of nihilism is a rationalistic understanding of life, that is, a posture toward life which evaluates life as calculate. Everything must be expressed in figures and diagrams. What change does this kind of positivistic life style give to those who live their own life? Man's concern is, in this case, directed only to how he can get along without experiencing any miscalculation. There is no adventure here, because a man decided how to live only after making minute reckoning through cautious control of everyday life to the end that he may not lose anything. The fearful and the coward are exposed here. In this sense, this kind of nihilism is misery for it lacks the beauty and abundance which spring out of the adventures in life.

As is clear from the above discussion, Thielicke thinks that nihilism originates basically in the fear of life. He thinks that the only way to overcome it is love, because only love expects and creates new things from men and society, and, consequently, can resist fatalism.<sup>16</sup> Further, love means that we live depending on God, the Creator, who, as our father, loves and guides us in the world.

14. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, trans. George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1936), p. 173.

15. Thielicke, *Nihilism*, p. 116.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 165ff.

Only when we believe that God can create new things at any time in history, can we find release ultimately from the fear of life and nihilism.

It seems to me that behind Thielicke's understanding of nihilism there is tacitly presupposed an *either-or* between belief in God and nihilism. If a man believes in God, he will be released from nihilism. If he does not, he has no hope. However, in my opinion, the relation between nihilism and ourselves is not so simple. Do we find no sound element in nihilism?

In the actuality of our life, there is the absurd which positively contradicts God's providence, and which can never be overlooked by regarding it negatively as the absence of God's providence. This is an actuality even to a believer. We cannot interpret such a situation in the simple scheme of *either-or*, that is, either to affirm the whole actuality of life by faith or to refuse the whole actuality of life as meaningless. Even to a believer nihilism is not something which must be discarded completely. Rather it has a sound element which awakens us from sweet illusions and forces us to face the actual absurdities of life.

It may be problematic to treat such a cynical remark as scholarly, but Thomas C. Oden's comment on Karl Barth's enthusiasm for Mozart is interesting in relation to this. "Barth's romance with Mozart is a clue to his nostalgia for a day gone by and his lack of touch with the internal reality of the contemporary mind whose nihilism and cynicism he rejects as empty of significance."<sup>17</sup>

In spite of Thielicke's criticism we are impressed by Picasso and Camus. I am very doubtful whether our impressions are contradicted directly by our faith in God. My thought that faith and a phase of nihilism are not always in opposition to each other is related to the current of theological thought after the Second World War which began with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of the world come of age (*die mündige Welt*). According to Bonhoeffer, man come of age will manage the world through his own ability under God's commission and will release himself from religious demands which look for objective grounds for life's meaning in this world. Accordingly, he interprets the world religionlessly. From this theological point of view, it is no longer necessary for us to interpret the world rationally and religiously, regarding it as a unity of logically understandable order because of God's rationalistic creation and providence. Nor is it any longer necessary for us to understand the world in such a fashion that the incomprehensible actualities in the world are considered only as evidence of our lack of intellectual power which will be made clear some day when our intellectual power will have been enlightened by the divine light. In my opinion, in this theological current there is a possible ground for logical development in which it

17. Thomas C. Oden, *Radical Obedience* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 21.



will be possible for us to realize the actuality of the absurd in the world and at the same time to believe in God.

Gerhard Ebeling's understanding of law is a development of Bonhoeffer's thought in the meaning of the *worldliness of faith*. He says that law for contemporary man means "managing reality without God," "the impotence of God in the world."<sup>18</sup> Law by which contemporary man must live and to which man comes back again even after beginning to live in faith is nothing but this. Man must bring, to some extent, order to this world by his own power, in order to create a world in which he can live. This is the work of law. We cannot fulfill the law, so we are driven to God who forgives. The place to which we return after we are accepted by God through faith is the reality of this world with which we must deal without God. The life to which Christ has invited us is that of participation in the impotence of God in this world. This, and only this, is the meaning of faith.<sup>19</sup>

If we follow the line of thought of Bonhoeffer and Ebeling, it is not necessary for us to regard what Camus expressed in *La Peste* (the existence of the dreadful, the irrational, and the absurd in this world) as something which, though contradictory to the omnipotence of God, we must somehow swallow up in our faith as being still within God's domination as Thielicke did. For in the world come of age, we do not start from the positive affirmation of the actuality of God's domination of the world. We need not regard nihilism as a type of thought which faith in God precludes completely. If we recognize the absurd for what it is, we must admit that there is something which is, in actuality, contradictory to God's will and outside His dominion and which is often irresistible as far as we are concerned, even though we must resist it insofar as we can. We must give up the religious attitude which tempts us, in a mood of abandonment, to recognize everything as God's will. The adventure of faith, the act of love, and the expectation of new astonishment in the future are possible for us without believing metaphysically that God dominates this world with his omnipotence. We are free to recognize the existence of the absurd outside God's power. The power of God's love expressed in Jesus' Cross and Resurrection threads its way through the absurd and encourages us to create our life in spite of the situation of despair enveloped by the absurd. In some cases the power of God's love makes it possible for us to avoid or break through the absurd. In other cases, it enables us to resist and overcome the absurd. The omnipotence of God's love — not metaphysically understood — is to let us overcome the absurd to some extent and guide us in such a way that when we cannot overcome it God shows us how to make use of it. This is nothing but God's creative "adequacy" in

18. Gerhard Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), pp. 154, 158. English translation, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 155, 159.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

the words of Edwin Lewis.<sup>20</sup> Jesus' Cross symbolizes the condition of despair and the Resurrection symbolizes the power to break through it.

What I am now discussing in terms of the absurd is, of course, in traditional theological terminology the *problem of evil*. The traditional treatment has usually classified evil into three categories, that is, natural evil, social evil, and moral evil, and has concentrated its attention on the problem of why evil exists in a world dominated by God's love and justice and by God's providence. This is indeed an objective treatment of the problem of evil. However, if one wants to be existential in his thinking about the providence of almighty God, he cannot be satisfied with the traditional treatment of the problem. What is lacking in the traditional treatment of the problem of evil is man's subjective passion to resist the existence of evil. This passion makes it possible for us to interpret God's omnipotence as the creative adequacy mentioned above and it also enables us to grasp history as the point of intersection between God's freedom and man's freedom. It urges us to rebel against the absurd in the world and allows us to accept the absurd only from the viewpoint of loving our enemy. I have treated the problem of sin in my book, *An Existentialist Approach to Theology*.<sup>21</sup> Here I should like to develop further the viewpoint expressed in that book in relation to the absurd. I wrote that sin is the inexplicable mystery or secret lying at the bottom of freedom. An explicable thing is something which is in the chain of cause and effect. It is necessary and natural and outside our responsibility. From such a point of view, I opposed the traditional and hereditary understanding of original sin and grasped it as an inexplicable mystery.

I now, however, feel it necessary to revise to some extent the understanding stated above. To attribute sin solely to the responsibility of man's freedom will simply drive man to despair of his moral ability. We cannot so blithely ignore what traditional theology has tried to express, although in insufficient forms. Man is *by nature* a sinner. Man has egotism which invades and restricts freedom even before he has a chance to exercise that freedom. Man's freedom and moral responsibility are not absolute, but relative, restricted by this egotism. We always fall into egotism whenever we make a decision, even though we have the possibility to be free and responsible, freed from egotism at the moment of decision. The traditional doctrine of original sin was wrong in that it thought egotism was hereditary and the flesh was evil. Egotism does not arise from the flesh but it has permeated the whole of man's being by nature. Such egotism which lies in the ground of man's being is evil from which man cannot extricate himself, the cause of which man cannot single out posi-

20. Cf. Yoshio Noro, *Jitsuzonronteki Shingaku* [An Existentialist Approach to Theology] (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1964), pp. 40ff.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 63f., 183ff.

tively, and against which man must rebel. That is to say, it is one element of the absurd. God could only create man as a being distorted by the absurd in this way. Nevertheless, God thought of the creation of man as good. Consequently, we must love our destiny of living while carrying inside ourselves our enemy, the inevitable egoism, original sin. The absurd is that which distorts the beauty of God's creation into something ugly. It is *discreativity* active in reality.

### III

What is the relation between those who live in a world come of age and God? The essence of love is to let its object become authentic. As man's growth as a free subject is the ground of man's authentic being, God's love is not contradictory to man's coming of age. The One who supplies man with the nourishment necessary for growth into full manhood must be God. That nourishment is His love.

We examined above Thieliicke's criticism of Picasso and suggested that his understanding of Picasso may reveal his disconnection, in the depth of his thought, with contemporary society. Thieliicke's distaste for Picasso was clearly expressed in the words he quoted from Berdyaev. Picasso's art "only strips off layer after layer, in order to lay bare the inner structure of the natural being . . . it has, in fact, lost the faculty of integral interpretation."<sup>22</sup> If Berdyaev's words, "it has lost the faculty of integral interpretation," are uttered on the level of a world view (*Weltanschauung*) the contemporary situation is just what the words express. But to those who affirm the forfeiture of the understanding of the world as a unitary whole as the characteristic of "the world come of age," there is no reason to deplore it, in spite of Thieliicke's opinion. It is more probable, however, that Berdyaev's words "integral interpretation" refer not to the understanding of the world but to the wholeness of man's nature. If that be the case, then the lostness of the "faculty of integral interpretation" is very serious indeed.

I do not understand the words "only strips off layer after layer, in order to lay bare the inner structure of the natural being" as necessarily implying loss of "the faculty of integral interpretation" of man's being. "To strip off layer after layer" is a concept of *dimensional thinking*. In order to understand reality deeply as a dynamic and creative (and not objective) unity *in our experience*, we must make distinctions among the dimensions in which reality encounters us. Much of reality will appear before us only when we concentrate our life effort exclusively on each of the dimensions of reality in such a way that we understand all dimensions encountering us as an organic unity while retaining strictly the differences among the dimensions.<sup>23</sup>

22. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, p. 173.

23. Noro, *An Existentialist Approach to Theology*, pp. 117ff.

A good example of dimensional thinking is Martin Buber's well-known dimensional distinction between "I-Thou" and "I-It."<sup>24</sup> By these words, Buber distinguished two dimensions in the subject's attitude toward the object. In the "I-It" attitude the subject posits his object objectively at a certain distance and treats the object as a disposable thing. The "I-Thou" attitude is such that the subject itself is passionately involved in the object and the depth of the subject is exposed in the encounter with the object. Needless to say, these two dimensions are connected with each other organically, because both dimensions are experiences of one and the same subject.

I agree with Harvey Cox's opinion that a third dimension should be taken into consideration when we discuss ethics in the contemporary world. This is the "I-You" dimension, which is to be distinguished from "I-Thou" and "I-It."<sup>25</sup> Cox understands this "I-You" as a new dimension of *city morality* in contrast with *town morality*. The concept is, in my opinion, an intermediate concept between "I-Thou" and "I-It." Cox says that the characteristics of the secular city in the world come of age are anonymity and mobility.<sup>26</sup> Anonymity means emancipation from the town morality which demands that we enter into the "I-Thou" relation with another man only because the man lives near in the spatial sense. In the secular city we can *release ourselves from such law* by becoming anonymous in relation to our neighbors. However, as we do not treat the anonymous man as *it*, but make much of his freedom and rights, there must be a relation of "I-You." City dwellers who have been emancipated from the law of space are free, in their mobility, to get acquainted with those whom they like and respect and to live with them in the "I-Thou" dimension. Cox thinks that the Israelite religion which did not deify space but was rather characterized by its desert mobility and its fight against Baal worship, a worship tied up with a place, and the gospel of Christianity, which destroyed the fence between the Jews and the Gentiles, affirm the secular city morality of mobility.

Having examined Cox's dimensional thought about city morality in the spatial sense, I would like to consider dimensional thinking about city morality in the sense of time, that is, dimensional thinking in the style of the secular city, to use Cox's terminology. Cox presents *pragmatism* and *profanity* as such styles. The concept of *profanity* needs no further discussion, because the assertion that the world is not divine but secular and entrusted to man's control is simply a development of Bonhoeffer's concept of "the world come of age." Cox refers to the second chapter of Genesis in which created man is ordered by God to give names to the lower class of God's creatures. It is asserted here that man is between God and the world

24. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1923). English translation, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

25. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965).

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 39ff.

and in the experience of man there are two distinct dimensions — the dimension of perfect obedience to God and the dimension of control of the world which has been entrusted to him by God. Cox explains pragmatism by referring to the late President of the United States, John F. Kennedy.

To say that technopolitan man is pragmatic means that he is a kind of modern ascetic. He disciplines himself to give up certain things. He approaches problems by isolating them from irrelevant considerations, by bringing to bear the knowledge of different specialists, and by getting ready to grapple with a new series of problems when these have been provisionally solved. Life for him is a set of problems, not an unfathomable mystery. He brackets off the things that cannot be dealt with and deals with those that can. He wastes little time thinking about “ultimate” or “religious” questions. And he can live with highly provisional solutions.<sup>27</sup>

We discover the dimensional thinking of the city dweller in these words of Cox, too. The pragmatism of the city dweller consists in such dimensional distinctions that he, first of all, distinguishes the dimension of the problems with which he need not deal for the time being from those with which he must deal now, and devotes himself to the latter. This may be called the spatial-dimensional distinction in pragmatism. The city dweller deals with problems, existing in the same place by classifying them spatially into several dimensions. There is also a temporal distinction in pragmatism. This distinction is evident in the city dweller’s propensity to devote his effort to the dimension of problems just coming, that is, present in his immediate future (Japanese *shorai*; German *Herkunft*), and thus valuing provisional solutions, by putting aside the dimension of the future, that is, the more distant future (Japanese *mirai*; German *Zukunft*).

The pragmatic style of life — which concentrates on one problem at that time and in that place with existential decisiveness and is steeped in the immediate problem itself rather than in an effort to grasp the detailed aspects of the whole — has united the abandonment of a unitary universal world view with the existential courage to live. The pragmatist thinks that the whole will gradually be revealed by scrutinizing and dealing with the part just before him and does not deal with the part with the assurance which he will be able to get only after having grasped the whole. He is able to live without an objective world view of the cosmos and history. His true life is, by giving up any objective assurance, to leap into the phase of life which is just coming before him, believing that the true place of life is there. For him, such a phase of life is truly a gift to him from a loving God. When Cox says that the historical-materialistic dialectics

27. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

of Marxism have not yet achieved a pragmatic point of view, nor a truly secular understanding of the world, he means that Marxism is an attempt to interpret history in terms of a world view and that it regards history as something divine which dominates men.<sup>28</sup>

It seems clear to me that this kind of dimensional thinking can be harmonized with the existentialist understanding of God's providence, which does not think objectively about how God dominates history and the world, but rather understands God's providence as nothing but creative adequacy in any absurd situation. In any case, the logical foundation of the existentialist understanding of the doctrine of providence is the concentration on the here and the now in the sense of dimensional thinking.

Cox writes in the passage cited above, "He [technopolitan man] wastes little time thinking about 'ultimate' or 'religious' questions. And he can live with highly provisional solutions." This is an indication that Cox has forgotten the mystery lying at the root of man's being and has dissolved morality and even the dimension from which the question of the meaning of life arises into the technological dimension of how to deal with problems. Cox identifies religion with idolatry and thinks religion is nothing but man's immaturity so that mature man can deal with the problem of his ground of being by the same method as he deals with secular things. I can understand his anti-religious posture. But I cannot agree with him when he asserts that even man's question about the ultimate only shows his immaturity. He criticizes Paul Tillich's assertion that, even though the question may take various forms according to the time and place, every man necessarily has within him the question related to the ultimate concern, the answer to which should be the revelation of God in Christ. Cox claims that theology which presupposes such a question cannot have any relevance to the pragmatic contemporary man who has no such question.<sup>29</sup> But is this really so? From such a Coxian point of view the relation between nihilism and Christianity as well as the problem of ethics cannot be treated seriously.

Man's ultimate question, though it has varied in form, has continued invariable in essence through all times. It is the question centering around nihilism — whether man's existence has any meaning at all. Cox has forgotten *man's dimension of depth* because his emphasis is on the horizontal and technological dimension. In this he reveals within himself the symptoms of modern man's disease which in the final analysis is the loss of humanity. To remember the poet Perse's passage, "Should man have forgotten that he was made of dust from the ground, the dust might remind him of his spiritual nature,"<sup>30</sup> is to remind ourselves that to live squarely in the present

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 68ff., pp. 118-123.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

30. Quoted from Gabriel Vahanian's *Wait Without Idols* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), p. 162.

age is not to drift with the current of the present age. Man's way must be a creative way toward the future, struggling through the diseases and disturbances of the time.

In relation to the above I should like to deal with a book written by a philosopher of religion who investigated the problem of the ground of humanity. Keiji Nishitani, in his book *What is Religion?*, uses the word "religion" as a word indicating the dimension of depth in man.<sup>31</sup> His positive use stands over against Cox's negative one. I do not intend here to discuss his entire system of thought, but rather to highlight those points useful in the development of our discussion. The first point I am interested in is his confrontation with Sartre. Nishitani is very sympathetic with Sartre in terms of the historical situation in which Sartre's thought originated. The traditional and theistic understanding of the God of Christianity in European thought had come to be at variance with the autonomous spirit of the contemporary age. The atheistic standpoint arose out of the war between obedience to God and the will to be autonomous. Insofar as Sartre stands in this current he enjoys the esteem of Nishitani. However, from Nishitani's point of view, in Sartre's humanistic standpoint of nothingness, nothingness is still understood as something which confronts man. Nothingness is something like a wall at the bottom of man's being and a man becomes responsible for his life only through confrontation with it. This means that Sartre still understands nothingness as something, relative as it is, in the confrontation with man's freedom. Such thinking is not thoroughgoing enough. It must be carried through to the realization of *void* (Japanese *ku*), the Buddhistic standpoint of the absolute nothingness. In Buddhistic thought nothingness ceases to be a wall confronting man's freedom. It permeates man's freedom itself. Man's freedom can exist only in that situation where man accepts the reality that everything is passing away and where such reality is expressed frankly. Nishitani says that the feeling of identification with everything will be born out of a real experience of the void and only then will true ethics become possible.

According to Nishitani, Sartre has not overcome the subject-object scheme. The subject-object scheme is the characteristic of the technological dimension of life. Consequently, Sartre is trying to understand the dimension of the depth of man's being with the technological dimension. Therefore, nothingness is understood as the object confronting the freedom of man the subject. On the other hand, Nishitani asserts, it is void that makes the real experience of nothingness beyond the subject-object scheme possible.

When Harvey Cox says in the quotation to follow that nihilism expresses the way of thinking characteristic of the springtime of modern man who has become autonomous by rejecting God and thus experiencing the relativization of all values, the nihilism mentioned is nothing but the same thing that Nishitani criticizes in Sartre.

31. Keiji Nishitani, *Shukyo to wa nani ka* (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1964), pp. 36ff.

It swings back and forth from a giddy celebration of the freedom man has when the gods are dead to a wistful longing for the return of a world of secure and dependable meanings and norms. In psychoanalytic terms, the nihilist displays a deep ambivalence toward the authority figure represented by God and traditional values. Having rejected the father, he still cannot achieve maturity and self-actualization. Nihilism therefore sometimes becomes a kind of diabolism. The nihilist uses his newfound freedom from the tyranny of God not to become a true man but to revel in all the things the dead God once forbade. Nihilism has in effect a new god, the nihil, the negative shadow of the dead God.<sup>32</sup>

It becomes evident that Nishitani's standpoint, based fundamentally in Buddhism, and our own are coincident. Surely, insofar as the personal God of Christianity is understood in terms of a theism in which God occupies a certain place and fetters man's freedom from the outside, in other words, insofar as God is believed in mythologically, nihilism which rejects such a God is right.

As Vahanian has pointed out, the cultural situation of the present age is post-Christian and its foundation is the death of God. Man has attained autonomy and freedom, and modern culture is, in this sense, immanentism.<sup>33</sup> The kind of God who destroys the logic of immanentism for man to supervise the world on his own initiative and who wants man to remain immature must pass away. God is *not necessary* in the sense that man *needs* God to make up for the lack in his own subjectivity. "The atheist is the herald of the coming of God, that God who precisely is no longer necessary in the immanentist framework of our universe."<sup>34</sup> "God is no longer necessary, he is inevitable."<sup>35</sup>

Who is this *coming God*, this *inevitable God*? God must be a God who has overcome both Sartre's nihilism and the nihilism described above by Cox. Such a God has passed through the death of God and will arrive only after the passing of a Christian culture in which God was regarded as necessary. God must be, in this sense, a post-Christian God. We cannot grasp the relation between God and man in the subject-object scheme. God's love is not on the other side from man standing over against him at a certain distance, but acts in an initiatory way, encouraging the response from *man in his freedom* and *allowing man to establish his own subjectivity*. This is the power of God's love. The essence of agape is the irritation that cannot

32. Cox, *The Secular City*, p. 34.

33. Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), esp. pp. 136ff; and *Wait Without Idols*, pp. 231ff.

34. Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols*, p. 223.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 46.



endure the distance between the subject and the object. But agape gives life to others by nullifying itself. The God of myth lacks this kind of love for He invades the freedom of others for the sake of His own rights. Only when a man is permeated with God's self-nullifying love, agape, can he respond freely from the depth of his heart (by establishing his own subjectivity) to it. Encounter with God in the Christian sense is, insofar as this is understood in terms of its overcoming the subject-object scheme, analogical to Nishitani's thought of overcoming the subject-object scheme by a real experience of void. However, the Christian message must inevitably employ a personal symbol when it speaks of God. As far as a sinful man is not forgiven by God, *the Other*, and not accepted by God, he is finally alone — this is not the solitude that protects subjectivity, but the loneliness that destroys the subjectivity of man. But the truth is that a man must be emancipated from the world of monologue to the world of dialogue of love, as the necessity of prayer indicates. As John C. Bennett once wrote, it is much harder to believe that this world which we experience, including our existence itself, will be lost eternally without being remembered by any One, than to believe in the non-existence of God.<sup>36</sup> Faith is, after all, as Miguel de Unamuno has said, the quixotic, decisive affirmation of man's deep naïveté as a creature that he cannot endure the loneliness of monologue with no one who will remember and accept him.<sup>37</sup> God is inevitable even though He is not necessary. That God is the too-much (*de trop*) must be regarded as only the words of the victims of the immanentism of the post-Christian cultural situation of our present age.

The controversy over demythologization which has been going on for some time seems in the final analysis to center on the problem of theological methodology, i.e., hermeneutics. It is true that the demythologizing dispute was instrumental in providing us with a methodology. It cannot, however, be truly productive until the discussions are extended to the problem of what type of systematic theology based on the methodology can be visualized.

In relation to this question, there are two types of systematic theology. One may be called the ontological type which would include the Death of God theology represented by such a theologian as Altizer, and the work of such men as Heinrich Ott, Paul Tillich, Stanley R. Hopper, and John Macquarrie, among others.

However, we must not fail to recognize a second type of systematic theology, an existentialist theology, which stands also on the same premise of methodology supported by the theory of demythologization, but is quite different from the ontological type. Such theologians as Friedrich Gogarten, Carl Michalson, and, with a certain reservation, Nels F. S. Ferré belong to this group. It seems to

36. John C. Bennet, "In Defense of God," *Look* (April 19, 1966).

37. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J.E.C. Fitch (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), pp. 177ff.

me that their thought is fundamentally identical with what Bultmann really meant by his existential interpretation. In discussing the man-God relationship they tend to avail themselves of such a basic approach as the "I-Thou" theory of Buber. They make more, in this respect, of the contribution of Bultmann than do the ontological theologians.

For Altizer, whose biblical interpretation differs from Bultmann's demythologization and Buber's "I-Thou" theory, God (or the Dead God, to be precise) was the Ground of Being in the depth of humanity. The difference between his approach and that of the other ontological theologians lies in his retaining a myth, that is, his idea that God as an *objective* being is dead. The God who once lived died in Christ, and, henceforth, exists in our humanity as the Ground of Being. The Dead God, in short, is for Altizer the Holy Spirit.

Other ontological theologians are closer to the philosophy of the later Heidegger. That Bultmann was greatly influenced by the philosophy of the earlier Heidegger, especially Heidegger's understanding of time in *Sein und Zeit*, is well known. There are, however, theologians who have been influenced by the later Heidegger, although even his own disciples have been unable to come up with a definite answer as to whether Heidegger's thought in his earlier period is different from that of his later period, or whether the later period is a mere elaboration of his earlier philosophy. In limiting our interest to the aspect of his impact on theology, it may suffice to give weight to the opinions of those disciples of his who claim that there was a definite change in Heidegger between the earlier and the later periods.

To be specific, the point of Heidegger's earlier thought is that man is an existence limited by death, and, therefore, the important thing for man constantly exposed to the nothingness of death is how to decide over against this reality and how to find a meaningful life. His emphasis, in this sense, is on the idea that man is an existence of temporality. On the other hand, his later philosophy sees man as the very place for the self-expression of Being-itself. A human being should be passive and obedient to this Being. Man must give ear to the voice of Being and make the best use of it just as a poet has the mission of expressing what he hears from the voices permeating deep into his own life. Heinrich Ott said that when we make use of Heidegger's later philosophy as a dialogical partner in our biblical interpretation we may come to understand that Karl Barth's interpretation is more biblical than Bultmann's. In speaking thus, Ott was trying to cut the Gordian knot of the conflict between Bultmann and Barth. For him Heidegger's Being was the best interpretation of God as the Creator, and the human being was the place where God manifests His power as the Creator.<sup>38</sup>

Is it too much to say that what Ott intended in this theology of

Being had already been accomplished by Paul Tillich? Although Tillich was apparently influenced by the earlier Heidegger, it is not far from the mark to say that God as "the Ground of Being" was the later Heidegger's "Being." Accordingly, Tillich did not see any conflict between God and man in the dimension of man's depth. For him, what makes a man a truly authentic human being was his return to the Ground of Being.

John Macquarrie who started out with the study of Bultmann and Heidegger is probably the first theologian after Tillich to publish a systematic theology based on the concept of Being. His book, *Principles of Christian Theology*, is a study based on the doctrine of the Trinity. By studying his achievements we may be able to understand the limitations of an ontological type of theology.<sup>39</sup>

He described God the Father as the Primordial Being, God the Son as the Expressive Being and God the Spirit as the Unitive Being. His Primordial Being is equal to the Ground of Being in Tillich and to the Dead God in Altizer. The primordial Being is ultimately a mystery for us and therefore we cannot grasp rationally God Himself. Primordial Being manifests itself by the act of creation, and we call such a form of manifestation by the word "Logos." It may be safe to summarize Macquarrie's theory at this point in the following words. Logos, as an expressive form of the Primordial Being much closer to our being than the Primordial Being as a mystery of being, gives our being a form. Logos is nothing but God the Son or the Expressive Being. This Logos manifested Itself in Christ most typically for our sake. It is the Unitive Being, the Holy Spirit, that functions as a mediator to reunite us to the Logos from which we have been separated. Thus, for Macquarrie, the one Being functioning in three ways encounters us.

It is, by the way, worth noting the fact that Macquarrie is trying hard to insert a delicate shade of Becoming into Being. As far as the traditional theory of Being in Greek philosophy is concerned, Being was something static and motionless. However, when we describe the Christian God as Being, Being has necessarily a dynamic connotation. It has to be Being with Becoming embraced in it; otherwise, it is impossible to describe the personal God as the Creative Power of history.

Such strained efforts as Macquarrie's can commonly be seen in any theology of Being. Being critical of such an approach, I would point out that ontological theology cannot give the transcendence of God its full due, in the way that theology based on the category of Becoming can. Christian theology has described God's act of creation as creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). Of course, we don't take this literally as a scientific truth, but according to Macquarrie,

39. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 182ff.

the relationship between God the Creator and the created in this myth is too similar to that between a handicraftsman and his handiwork. Macquarrie insists that there be another way of description to be combined with this *creatio ex nihilo* which, according to him, propounds too explicitly the over-against-ness between God and the created. It is interesting that he offers us Emanation (the word used by Plotinus) as a supplement.<sup>40</sup> The word implies that everything of this world emanated from the One, God. If so, there is no doubt that every earthly thing participates in, and, finally in its depth, is identical with the substance of God. I cannot, however, share Macquarrie's understanding that without the application of emanation to the understanding of the creation God's over-against-ness in relation to man is overemphasized and cannot be theologically adequate. It does not seem an accident to me that he felt compelled to describe God's being immanent in terms of emanation. We can see the fundamental motif in the theology of Macquarrie in this neo-Platonic attempt (an attempt common in some of the Early Church Fathers). His method with its emphasis on Being can neither describe adequately the qualitative difference between God and man nor God's transcendence over man. Though Being is inseparable from man, such ontological theologians may defend their positions by saying that Being is the Ground of a human being, and therefore is transcendent over against man in terms of depth. But it seems to me that such a version of transcendence is unable to explain as sufficiently the over-against-ness of man and God as the *creatio ex nihilo* myth is able to. The ontological theologians may say that by putting Being before Becoming they try to describe the substance of God and the permanence of His love for man. What they fail to see is the fact that the permanent substance of a personal God is rather analogous to an unchangeable axis within the process of man's becoming, and is similar to man's experience that I stay "I" despite my becoming.

Secondly, it seems to me that an ontological theology such as that of Macquarrie does not do full justice to history. Man as a free and responsible agent in history is called to love others, yet he commits sin and is punished accordingly. God, too, acts in history as a free agent. It is this drama of the interaction of man's freedom and God's that is appreciated but inadequately by the ontological theologians. In their theory, history is abused unawares simply as a place for Being to manifest itself. Carl Michalson might have called this a naturalization of history. Man here is only a place for Being to manifest itself. In this type of thought man's wrongs can be imputed to Being. And man is not regarded as an agent creating history.

The biggest fault of such an ontological theology is its failure to take man's sin seriously. Man is regarded as something tied with Being itself, inseparable from something divine in his depth. Coquet-

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 200ff.

tishly enamoured of the presumed beauty of his own depth man loses sight of God as the judge who stands over against man questioning him and calling him to accountability.

Another problem ontological theologians are confronted with is that they fail to grasp the seriousness of the question of evil. Too close a connection between history and Being leaves no room for the evil of the absurd. History for them is only the stage for the drama of Being and has no room for what we have called the absurd which is against God.

Further, ontological theology tends to dilute man's authentic reverence for God. In relation to this I would point out the following factors.

(1) The ontological approach blurs the fact that our entire existence is constantly supported and guided by the mercy of the personal God. According to the ontological approach man is by nature tied up inseparably with Being. It is in opposition to the idea that a human being, even when committing a sin and being punished by God, could be rewelcomed by God through the mercy of Christ. In the nonontological approach, although it is true that even a sinner will not be totally separated from God and cannot escape the control of the personal God, the sinner here is heading in the direction away from God, turning his face away from God. Here man's bond with God is cut off unless God rewelcomes him. According to the ontological way of thinking, however, the sinner's bond with God is never severed. He must seek God because the bond remains. Ontological theologians cannot accept the paradox that a sinner seeks God because he is empty after being cut off from God.

(2) From the viewpoint of ontological theologians, man cannot give himself as a whole to God, for he is inevitably already connected with God at the ground of his being. There is within him some part which he does not and cannot freely offer to God afresh because it is by nature already God's. Worship in such a situation can only be lackluster.

(3) Their theory that history and God are combined ontologically involves the danger that the agony of history may be extended into God, that is, the danger of patripassianism. Once we entertain the idea that the substance of God's being is infiltrated by pain, our life is cast into darkness and there is no asylum to which we can turn for peace. Man cannot tolerate a God who suffers from pain. However painful our own life may be, we want at least to see its depth filled and blessed with joy arising from holy communion with God. God should be, in essence, a joy for us. Ontological thinking, however, will end up taking this joy of faith in God away from us. But our claim for the impossibility of God should not be understood as standing in the way of the idea of a God who suffers in the relationship of love between Himself and man. God can truly suffer only because He is the Being substantially filled with joy. It is impossible to experience joy while avoiding pain, which is only the other side of

the coin. This kind of pain in God is exactly what the Cross of Christ symbolizes.

It was mentioned above that Macquarrie takes Logos as an expression of Being. Here another fallacy of ontological thinking is implicit. This points to the danger that our Ground of Being which should be God's love, may be reduced to a mere mode of existence where the form of Being underlying history is taken seriously while the fluid aspects of history are neglected. When history is neglected in this way, we are plunged into the abyss of Pharisaism, giving cause for the subservience of the Biblical truth to, for example, such historical philosophy as Marxism. History here gives up its own dynamic right and is naturalized.

On the other hand, theology based on Buber's "I-Thou" relationship regards God as the Other that presses for our response. This theology differs radically from the ontological approach in seeing man as always qualitatively differentiated from God. In my support of this existentialist approach, I consider the Holy Spirit as God's work of bringing about a paradoxical union between the freedom of man and that of God in history. The reality of the initiative taken by God through Christ to prompt a voluntary response from man may best be described as the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we may use the concept of *Creative Freedom* instead of Ground of Being to describe God the Father. God is thought of in terms of Becoming incorporating Being and not vice versa. The substance of God is not Being but Freedom. All the moments of truth involved in ontology should, therefore, be included in God's freedom.

In conjunction with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, we have to elaborate in more detail God as Creative Freedom. In this case Bergson's idea of duration (*durée*) is useful, but duration is not to be understood chronologically. Chronological time as a result of being subject to the space symbol can be divided into equal parts, whereas it is impossible to divide duration in the same fashion. What we really experience is not clock time. For example, it is possible to be involved in the past while living in the present, as our body exists right now while our mind reflects upon things past. It is also possible for us to enjoy or to be agonized by imaginings of the future, thus involving ourselves in the future over against the backdrop of the present in which we are physically present right now. In the kind of time we actually experience, the present, the future, and the past are delicately intertwined. This type of time is what Bergson meant by his concept of duration. This concept can be retained as the basis on which an existentialist theology can be built. When we take Bultmann's eschatological understanding of kerygma the case becomes even more apparent. For him kerygma is from the future, and here the future is not considered as a kind of phenomenon yet to come into being, but, rather, as an affair already involved in the present and demanding our decision in reference to it.

Interestingly enough, the French novelist Saint-Exupéry has not

only applied Bergson's idea of duration in his own thinking, but also has his own original idea of *étendue*.<sup>41</sup> The reason why Saint-Exupéry did not use *espace* is because he wanted to describe what we may call an existential understanding of space by means of this word *étendue*. Mail may be conveyed by airplane and from the point of view of the pilot of the plane the distances separating the towns dotting the land below him are clear. However, for a lover who has received a letter from his sweetheart the distance between his place and hers is for a moment eradicated. The kind of space we picture on a map is quite different from that which our heart experiences. Saint-Exupéry used the word *étendue* to describe the type of space experienced in our heart. In such experience something in the distance may come very near, while something very near often seems very far away. Therefore, turning away for a moment from the heavy concentration of the attention of existentialist theology on developing theories of time, I would suggest that we need to give more attention to the theory of space.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in short, is dependent, while it is inseparably connected with the idea of God, upon how we think about the problem of transcendence and immanence in theology. There is no question that the two-storied view of reality, with God in heaven and man on earth, having been erected on the foundation of the world image prevalent in biblical times has fallen to pieces for us since the development of modern science. There is small wonder then that the temptation arises of throwing away the theological concept of transcendence. If we do so, the only thing left is immanentism. In this way the Death of God theology, Tillich, Ott, and Macquarrie all turn to the God of immanentism as the Ground of Being, forsaking the God of transcendence.

In my view, however, their approach is too easygoing to answer the problem. When we try to convert the transcendent God into the immanent God just because transcendence appears to have been a miscarriage in theology, or when we try to confine God to the Ground (basement) of Being under us (on the first floor) just because it is no longer acceptable to think of God as in heaven (the second floor), our thought patterns remain chained to the kind of space relationships expressed in measured distances, or in dimensions of up and down, high and low. We should move instead toward a theory where transcendence is at the same time immanence and vice versa, by taking advantage of such existential understanding of space as reflected in Saint-Exupéry's concept of *étendue*.

It is often the case that something in the distance is experienced as very near when one personal being encounters another. It is also possible that the person who loves me knows me better than I do myself. In the "I-Thou" encounter with the space gap involved, as

41. Cf. René Marill Albérés, "Leçon pour les hommes d'aujourd'hui," in Saint-Exupéry (Paris: Hachette, 1963).

indicated by the “-” between “I” and “Thou,” “I” cannot influence “Thou” no matter how much one loves the other, unless the one receives a favorable decision (voluntary response) from the other. “I” and “Thou” are in the mutual relationship of transcendence, but at the same time it can happen that the one restrains the other (spiritual penetration) in such a paradoxical way of love as to prompt the voluntary response from the other. The other, in this case, volunteers to be fettered, having been allured in the depth (heart) of his being (immanentism) and no longer able to resist for himself. This is the very freedom in Christ for a believer, who is at the same time the slave of Christ. This is exactly what I should like to call transcendence-immanence and immanence-transcendence. I would insist that this takes place through our encounter with the Christ event (God the Son) in us; and when we experience encounter with God in this manner, God’s presence for us is properly called the Holy Spirit. Isn’t it possible that the biblical expression that God is spirit means the whole character of the trinitarian God as the transcendent-immanent love?<sup>42</sup>

Finally, I would suggest that ontological theology is a kind of mysticism in its positing of a substantial connection between God and man. Mysticism is always trapped by the question of guilt-consciousness, and lacks a real feeling that man is entirely a sinful being before God. Such mysticism leaves no adequate room for a serious discussion of the doctrine of original sin. In this respect it is necessary to give thought to the battle Martin Luther had to wage with mysticism. It is well known that young Luther was greatly influenced by the writings of Johannes Tauler or such mystical works as *Theologia Germanica*. He learned from mysticism that a man must love God from the bottom of his heart and that a man must be humble before God. Before long, however, he demonstrated a strong resistance toward German mysticism so that he could break through to a deeper religious experience. In contrast to the German mysticism which insisted that once a man plunges to the bottom of his soul through humility and silence he discovers the divine there, Luther followed the same course only to discover in the depth of his soul not the divine but self-love and his own sinful nature. Our doctrine of the Holy Spirit should take Luther’s experience seriously. The Holy Spirit is something that reveals not divinity but our sinful nature in our depth dimension, and thus presses us to make the decision to rely personally on Christ.

This has been an attempt to draw a line as clearly as possible between ontological theology and existentialist theology by way of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. If there be some contention that there is no such thing as the ontological theology I have described here, and that the existentialist theology with which I am identified is true ontological theology, I would be happy to stand as an onto-

42. Cf. Nels F.S. Ferré, *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing* (London: Epworth Press, 1966).



logical theologian. At any rate existentialist theology as I understand it can include ontology only in the following sense.

Existentialist theology takes the personal encounter between man and God as its starting point. It grasps the content of the biblical Creation Myth as indicating that man is created out of God's love. Therefore, it supports the idea that every human being is made for love and is commonly destined to be united with the Ground of Personal Love, as distinguished from the ontological theological claim that man and God are somehow in the depth dimension a substantial unity. When man betrays love as the ground of his being and sins, he cannot fulfill his destiny. He collapses from inside with an emptiness which, in turn, may lead him to seek God. Only such arguments that the emptiness of Personal Love in his heart is an obstacle in fulfilling his destiny, and that a human being as his destiny has been made that way, are qualified for proper understanding of the *imago Dei* in man. These are all the ontological aspects that existentialist theology can possibly include in itself.

Is our theological position that of pluralism since we posit *God*, who is transcendent-immanent and free in His paradoxical love, *man*, who longs for God in his emptiness without agape, and *the absurd*, which is outside of God's sovereignty over nature and history? It might possibly be referred to as a pluralism, but only from the objective standpoint. We are not afraid of being called to be so, since we do not care any more for the literal truth of the creation myth. However, existentially speaking, we are *monistic* in the sense that God, the Creative Freedom, is adequate to handle any absurd situation which involves Himself and man. It is an existential love-monism and not a monistic world view. Agape is all powerful to make the absurd into something beneficial in order for man to become an authentic self. This monism is enough for theology which has become worldly and adult and this monism is also contrary to any ontological theology, as well as a traditional theistic monism, which is by nature a metaphysical monism and does not allow room for the absurd. And this precious possibility of becoming authentic — the deepest type of overcoming the subject (man)-object (the absurd) scheme — is not there outside of our kind of existentialist theology.

# Historicality\* and Responsibility

## In Memoriam Carl Michalson

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"In his earliest writings he [Schleiermacher] said, 'religion begins and ends with history.' Contemporary theology is just discovering the truth of that early claim . . ." <sup>1</sup> Thus wrote Carl Michalson in 1963 and in so doing he indicated the fundamental orientation ("Grund-Stellung" – Heidegger) of his theological method, namely, that history is "the medium in which reality appears." <sup>2</sup> I would like to take up this theme, this characteristic motif (Leitmotiv) of Michalson's and, on the basis of a fundamental agreement with it, carry the point into further inquiry. My question is, to what extent are history and its structural essence, which we call "historicality," adequately defined through the concept of responsibility? I think that with this combination of "historicality" and "responsibility" I remain within the frame of Michalson's intent.

### I.

Where historicality is discovered as a philosophical theme, responsibility is discovered with it, and likewise, where historicality is contested as a philosophically significant reality, responsibility is similarly contested. For example, French Structuralism wants to replace the historical "diachronic" way of viewing human realities with an unhistorical "synchronic" way. Consequently, we hear from the structuralists statements such as, "Today we have to get rid of the illusion of the autonomy of the subject" (Jacques Lacan), and "The 'I' is destroyed . . . – now it is the discovery of the 'there is' that is important" (Michel Foucault).

What do "historicality" and "history" really mean? Not only succession and development, although certainly this "diachronic" element is also essential in the concept of history. But decisive over

\*Geschichtlichkeit. Often this German term is translated as "historicity." However, historicity was a technical term for Carl Michalson referring to meaninglessness in history. Therefore, "historicality" has been chosen for translation.

1. Carl Michalson, "Theology as Ontology and History," *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, New Frontiers in Theology, vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 136-56.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

and beyond that is the fact that succession, the "diachronic" is mediated by freedom — not the freedom of arbitrary choice, but the freedom which is an understanding of meaning. In the moment of freedom past and future are reflected, for in every understanding of meaning past and future are also understood (*mit-verstanden*). There is, therefore, in distinction to the merely evolutionary diachrony of nature, a diachrony which may be called *historical*.

Freedom, whose concept is first made possible by the historical way of viewing reality, is a primordial given (*Ur-Datum*) in our inner perception of ourselves. Certainly one could explain this perception of freedom in ourselves as an illusion, but then our thought would become groundless because it would no longer be rooted in what we really experience and live as thinking-existing beings. Thought would move in an abstract world of illusion where experience would rather be explained as a world of illusion, and experience is the only thing which is really concrete. But which is the illusory world? That is the question. Which is abstraction from reality and which is reality? Is reality the totally mathematical world of measurable data, or is it the world of concrete self-experience which shows us the phenomenon of meaning-understanding freedom (*sinn-verstehenden-Freiheit*)? Which is real? Is concrete self-experience with its pretense of meaning only an illusory substructure of the measurable world of facts, or is the measurable world of facts simply the abstract net of coordinates of the concrete world of experience? Since the absolute standpoint of truth, from which alone the dilemma may be solved, is not at our disposal, must we not venture a sort of wager, a wager that is from a distance perhaps comparable to Pascal's?

Let us assume that the wager has been ventured. Let us assume that responsibility, freedom, is a reality, perhaps *the* reality, and that history is consequently "the medium in which reality appears" (Michalson), that history is the horizon of reality itself. Let us describe responsibility as the act of responsible freedom of the historical subject which always mediates the movement of history. Then question arises: does the concept of responsibility alone suffice to define the essence, the "structural essence" of history, i.e., to define historicity itself? Or is there yet another and equally original structural element essential to historicity?

As we ask this question it is important to remember that history — just because it is mediated by the act of responsibility — knows and brings forth the unique.

## II.

We wish to illuminate our question first of all from a methodological standpoint. The question is *phenomenological*, i.e., a question about the structure of what appears, insofar as we understand it as being-that-appears (*Erscheinendes*).

With comprehension I perceive responsibility (and hence history,

ever mediated by responsibility, in its historicality). It is a comprehensible phenomenon of existence, not a merely recordable mathematical datum which I cannot perceive. This comprehensible phenomenon is not reduced, registered and fed into a scheme of data organization, but it is rather understood as *just what it is*, therefore in its *content* and as an original *unity*. The structure-concept assures this specific unity of the comprehensible phenomenon, for "structure" means unity and wholeness. It means that in a phenomenon all belongs together in a unity and a whole and is not fortuitously compounded out of separate individual parts.

It is rather the single isolated datum that is *unstructured*. Precisely because it is isolated it lacks structure. On the other hand, the comprehensible phenomenon of existence — precisely because it is comprehensible and not merely data to be registered — has its own specific structure of meaning. To comprehend it means to realize, to understand its structure. Therefore thought which concentrates on the phenomena as such is always interested in the structural unity, in the conscious demonstration of a meaningfully necessary unity of aspects. We have learned from Martin Heidegger this method of phenomenological demonstration of structural wholes in the phenomena of existence (therefore in historical phenomena, if it is indeed true, that there is something like history). Correspondingly, we have learned to differentiate between structures and mere combinations.

### III.

Now we must move from methodological considerations to the actual problem at hand. We shall apply the method described above to that material field within which the method wins its validity: the field of historical reality.

If there is such a thing as history as development mediated by responsibility and as continuous bringing forth of the unique, then responsibility belongs to the structure of the phenomenon of historicality. That follows from what has already been said. But history and historicality form a unity for without historicality history would be no more than a meaningless passing away. The question is whether or not the phenomenon history in its structure is *adequately* defined through the concept of responsibility.

What does "responsibility" mean? It is an act of Being-one's-self (des Selbstseins). In the realization of responsibility "I find my own identity" (to use a popular expression but one as yet little enlightened from the essence of personality). I become one with my act, I make it my own. This moment will ever become the turning point, the hinge (Angelpunkt), of all historical "causality" and therefore of all historical occurrence. History is the "medium in which reality appears." But responsibility is the immanent and constitutive condition of the possibility of history.

Does it suffice to view only this turning point in order to grasp what history really is?

Certainly when I make my act my own, when I become one with it, when I become responsible with regard to it, there remains a margin, a remainder, which I cannot make my own. Complete congruence is never achieved. Bound with my acting there are always circumstances which do not stand within my power of control, hence for whose existence I cannot assume responsibility. Therefore all acting is accompanied by risk.

Is this marginal zone, which lies just outside one's grasp and over which he has no control, an accident over against which responsibility, as this act of being-one's-self or becoming-one's-self, would have to be described as the "substance" of historical reality? No, because there can be no such thing as responsibility without risk, without the margin of the uncontrollable. Responsibility without risk would be degraded to the arbitrary game of one who sits at all the controls of power and can clearly calculate in advance all the consequences of his action. The element of risk, as the "beyond" of responsibility, is in fact constitutive for responsibility. Therefore the margin of the uncontrollable is not accidental to, but with responsibility equally constitutive for the reality of history. Risk and responsibility equally belong originally to the structural essence of history. As an historical being a person both gives and takes, is both active and passive in that unique dialectic which Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed in his corollaries "resistance" and "submission."

The objection could certainly be raised again that risk cannot be a positive constituent of historicity but rather is only a negative result which follows *de facto* from the combined effects of the numerous other uncontrollable and incomprehensible responsibilities of other persons. That position would assert that, as a responsible, acting person, I always have to risk something, insofar as I in my freedom never know what other equally free persons will decide. Here, however, the speculation about an "ideal" case of "pure" responsibility is possible, a case in which I do know what the others will decide. And here once again risk becomes only a secondary element, not equally original, and responsibility is theoretically again degraded to a game without risk. And as always, when responsibility is thought without the equally original element of risk, the concept of responsibility is emptied of its genuine content. It is no longer the act of responsibility which we know and comprehend as an existential phenomenon. It has been cut away from its only possible phenomenal ground, experience.

From these considerations we must try to give the margin of risk a positive significance. Risk is not only risk but also gift, grace, the *kairos*. In acting, I grasp the *kairos*; I grasp that which is beyond my power of disposal. Let us take an example out of every day life. By his own choice a man adopts the orphaned children of his deceased friends and becomes a father to them. In later years, an originally

unexpected and never hoped for meaning will flow into his life as a result of the community formed among father and children. He will be repaid a hundredfold for his good deed. That is a fragment of a life history . . . What is historical is not only the free act but the flow of new meaning as well. Not only the responsible act but also that which lies beyond it, the gift, belongs to the *full* concept, the deep concept of historicality.

Do we with our phenomenological reflection on historicality really encounter the phenomenon of grace? In our acting responsibly do we really touch the edge of the divine? It is not my intention to offer a new proof of God, but I do intend to say, however, that in phenomenological thought we must hold the openness of this dimension open. This is necessary if the sciences of man himself are to gain a philosophical foundation in an adequate hermeneutical anthropology.

The *kairos* belongs to the structure of historicality with the same originality as responsibility, and only therefore is history able to bring forth and retain the unique. And therefore also, in my own historicality, for example, my short, even in a certain sense only momentary encounter with Carl Michalson — an encounter whose promise of a future friendship of work together was so abruptly canceled — can be an unforgettable, inspiringly unique reality.

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# Carl Michalson's Theology of Preaching

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## I. Introduction

Knowing Carl Michalson was like touching a live wire. An electricity shot through him unguarded by the insulation with which most men protect themselves. He seemed to be directly and constantly in touch with his sources of power. Sometimes he was magnetic, sometimes shocking, always he animated the situation. And nowhere was his power to illuminate more evident than in his theology of preaching.

"Theology of preaching" is almost as difficult to define as Michalson himself. And yet for me, at least, the one term helps us to understand the other.<sup>1</sup>

In the understanding of theology of preaching I offer here, the stimulus of Michalson's thought is apparent. What is "theology of preaching" as we shall use the term?

## II. Theology of Preaching

In 1961 an article appeared in the *The Pulpit* entitled "Wanted: A Theology of Preaching." The article was by Conrad Massa and in brief summarized the doctoral dissertation he had recently completed at Princeton Theological Seminary. In the main, Massa's article called for a *theological* understanding of preaching. This article articulated the attitude of many who felt that American preaching had become trivialized and irrelevant, and that the resources of theology pointed the way to renewal.

At roughly the same time, and since then, several works appeared which in effect "applied" for the job "advertised" in *The Pulpit*. Among these works were *Theology and Preaching* by Heinrich Ott, *A Theology of Proclamation* by Dietrich Ritschl, *The Living Word* by Gustaf Wingren, *Proclaiming the Word* by Ronald Sleeth, and the republication of the earlier but important *Positive Preaching and the*

1. For the fuller discussion of this subject see my doctoral dissertation, "Augustine's Theology of Preaching" (Boston University Graduate School, Ph.D., 1962). For my attempt to develop homiletics theologically, see *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

*Modern Mind* by P. T. Forsyth, and others. A number of other works were relevant to the subject although they did not focus on the major issue.

Each of these works had real strengths, and together they offered the following assets: 1) They called for a serious, "scientific" approach to the subject of preaching which had often been treated in a sentimental and undisciplined way. 2) They showed the possibility of studies in which the interaction and interconnection of theology and preaching were constantly stressed. 3) They pointed up the centrality of Biblical interpretation in theology of preaching. And other advances could be listed among their assets.

However, along with these assets, certain disturbing liabilities were apparent in these works. 1) The question of the philosophical and theological presuppositions of preaching were not dealt with as a matter of deliberate principle. Nevertheless all the writers touched on philosophical themes, reluctantly and with an inconsistent and inadequate philosophical eclecticism. As a result, the whole area of the philosophical and theological foundations of preaching remained undealt with and a yawning gap lay at the very base of the project as it was conceived. 2) The writers in general presupposed the form/content dichotomy in which they conceived of theology as dealing with the "content" of preaching while "homiletics", or "preaching" dealt with the "form." One result of this was that none of the books really came to grips with the practical implications of their theology. Interestingly, Ritschl, who makes the most feverish attack against the "practical" side of homiletics, is forced to give his own treatment of this matter in an appendix. Theology of preaching conceived on this dichotomy is thus truncated and offers no guidance in the crucial area of preparation and delivery of an actual sermon to an actual congregation. 3) The writers tend to assume, reluctantly, the subject/object dichotomy. They tend to work within an "objectifying" frame of reference. Related to this, the question of "demythologizing" is not taken up, although Ott more than the others is aware of this dimension of the problem. Nevertheless, the question of the validity of objectifying thinking, and the closely related question of the existential interpretation of Scripture is not taken up.

Thus it may be said that "theology of preaching" as it stands at present presents major weaknesses at both its "beginning" and its "end." It deliberately refuses the task of throwing light on the presuppositions which underlie preaching on the one hand and on the other hand it refuses to deal with the practical questions which face the preacher who must deal with a real sermon to real people. The net result of the situation is that the job "advertised" in *The Pulpit* is still open.

It is our claim that this important position can be filled in a way which gathers up the strengths so far demonstrated while avoiding the weaknesses of these approaches. This can be done by a



phenomenological approach to our subject. A phenomenological approach would deal with the first problem cited by raising the philosophical question to the level of self-critical reflection. That is, the philosophical questions would be admitted into the discussion as full dialogical partners. By choosing phenomenology as our primary philosophical method, we would not be thereby attaching ourselves irrevocably to one philosophical alternative, but we would rather be choosing a base from which judgments on philosophical matters could be made in a self-conscious, discerning, and consistent manner. Moreover, it is the very character of phenomenology not to intrude itself into the subject-matter, unlike many philosophical systems utilized by theology in the past. Phenomenology only seeks to describe what appears, and to the degree that it "adds" to the subject-matter it is thereby defective both as philosophy and theology.

Once this step is taken, the path through the other two weaknesses is sighted. Given a phenomenological approach, there cannot be a radical distinction between form and content. Rather, what had before been thought of as "form" under which "content" appeared is now seen as the manner in which the subject-matter manifests itself, or, we may say, the style is a function of the stuff of preaching. Reality is not subject to the form/content dichotomy, but is rather a multi-layered structure. Thus, the question of the "style" of the sermon, the "how" of its presentation, is a "layer" in this multi-layered structure which is integral to the whole. There can be no denigration of the techniques of homiletics when they are held in continuity with the subject matter of preaching since they are questions of how the subject matter manifests itself, i.e., how the phenomenon appears.

A phenomenological approach further overcomes the subject/object dichotomy which so infects the existing works in theology of preaching. There is not a radical disjuncture between the knower and the object known. Rather, truth discloses itself in "a mode of togetherness" (Michalson). The effect of this approach on the interpretation of Scripture should become clearer as we progress.

What actually would theology of preaching look like when approached from a phenomenological point of view? A phenomenological approach to the theology of preaching would yield the following multi-layered structure. First, the question of the intentionality of preaching would be raised. Here we consider what gives preaching its meaning and makes it possible. The attempt would be made to bracket out that which does not proceed from the essence; the definition of preaching would be sought. Secondly, we would seek to discover the subject-matter of preaching. Thirdly, we would analyze the shape in which the subject matter manifests itself. We would study the results of the sermonic manifestation of preaching. Preaching as the phenomenon in question is not to be regarded as inhabiting only one of these layers, but is to be regarded as ricocheting throughout its multi-layered structure.

Simply put, theology of preaching seeks to make clear the purpose, nature, subject-matter, method, and consequences of preaching. Theology of preaching seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is Christian preaching and why do Christians preach? 2) What should Christians preach? 3) How should Christians preach? 4) What are the consequences of Christian preaching?

These questions should always be dealt with although not necessarily in this order nor in these precise terms.

Would theology of preaching as thus conceived fill the "advertisement" in *The Pulpit*? Looking more closely at the article referred to in the beginning, it is apparent that theology of preaching as here set forth probably would not because it does not meet at least two restrictions listed there. Massa wants a view of preaching which "gets rid of rhetorical aims." While he is right that homiletics has been dominated by rhetorics which have not been subject to careful theological scrutiny, he is wrong in calling for the dismissal of rhetoric altogether as he seems to imply. Rather what is needed is a theological understanding of rhetoric, of language, and this our theology of preaching embraces. Further, Massa wants a theology of preaching which is not concerned with results. He is right here to attempt to lift preaching out of the swamp of statistics: how large a crowd, how many "converted." But preaching does have authentic consequences, and no theology of preaching which is serious can afford to ignore them. Thus, theology of preaching in this new version does not so much fill the "advertisement" as apply and seek to rewrite it.

Nevertheless, it shares fully the call for "an adequate theological understanding of the nature and purpose of preaching." Moreover, it agrees that preaching is fundamentally an event, and that confrontation is basic. Thus it is hoped that while this understanding of theology of preaching does not fit the specifications of this article, it will help to fill the need to which it pointed.

This then is the understanding of the theology of preaching which guides us as we explore Michalson's work.

### III. *The Definition & Purpose of Christian Preaching*

"Preaching is the hermeneutical mode by which God's presence in Jesus of Nazareth, always potentially past, is kept up to date. The function of preaching is so to exegete the history of Christianity that it will be destroyed in respect of its pastness in order to bring the present time under the Lordship of Christ and into his new age."<sup>2</sup>

In these two sentences Michalson sums up his understanding of the nature and purpose of Christian preaching. This summary, which appears near the end of his posthumously published *Worldly Theology*, is especially helpful since preaching is dealt with

throughout his writings and the meaning often understandably shifts in relation to the context in which the term is used. For example, he writes that "every mode of Christian interpretation is embraced by that term [preaching]." <sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the broadest conception of preaching in Michalson's thought is that of "the practical encounter of the world by the Church's interpretation of faith." <sup>4</sup> In this way Michalson can refer to the "authentic contemporary practice" <sup>5</sup> of the Church as preaching. Preaching is "any act of communication in which the intention is present to bear witness to the meaning of the Christ event for our ongoing lives." <sup>6</sup> Michalson rightly observes of Wesley that he defined preaching in relation to people and not to the pulpit, and this definition he shared. <sup>7</sup> Preaching, he insists, is not the message only nor the act of declaration. Preaching embraces the invitation to enter the new age which comes with a claim upon the hearer. <sup>8</sup> What makes preaching Christian, however, is that while man speaks to men God is heard. Preaching then is a dynamic interaction between preacher, people and God.

That "faith comes by hearing" is fundamental to Michalson. Romans 10:14 and 17 is a key text. He quotes Luther approvingly; "faith is an acoustical affair." <sup>9</sup> In stressing the auditory character of preaching Michalson leaves himself open to the charge that he has excluded nonverbal means of communication. However, I would say that the statement that "faith comes by hearing" is basically an affirmation of the point already made, namely that preaching lives in a dynamic interaction between preacher, people and God. The auditory aspect of communication is perhaps the best paradigm of that interaction. It has about it the rush of immediacy of history as when one cries "the war is over!" or "the strike is ended!"

In one of his most stunning statements Michalson writes, "the reality of the resurrection occurs in the preaching of the Church." <sup>10</sup> In the presence of the resurrection we have two alternatives, preaching or myth. He agrees with Bultmann that the proper paraphrase of Romans 4:25 is, "if Christ is not present in the preaching, in the faith, in the event, he is a mythical form." <sup>11</sup> Preaching announces God's presence in Christ and bridges the gap from the faith of the apostles to our faith. The faith of the apostles is an experience of transition, "an experience of transition from death to

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

6. *The Hinge of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 214.

7. *Worldly Theology*, pp. 127-128.

8. *Worldly Theology*, p. 181.

9. *The Hinge of History*, p. 217.

10. *The Hinge of History*, p. 191.

11. *The Hinge of History*, p. 200.

life in response to the living person of Jesus Christ. Preaching communicates this living relation."<sup>12</sup>

Michalson continues to set forth his genuinely radical understanding of preaching.

The prototype of all preaching is God's word to man in the exaltation of Christ on the Cross. God speaks in the Cross and man hears in the resurrection: This is the single event of God's proclamation. The hyphenation of speaking-hearing, of cross-resurrection, is the eschatological event. It includes God's merciful act and man's response of faith. It includes dying and rising. This responsibility for preaching is passed on to the Church. Now we have Christ's ministry. We are Christ's ambassadors. God spoke in Christ. His living speech is the eschatological event which becomes present in the speech of preaching.<sup>13</sup>

Preaching thus understood obviously cannot be confined to what is done in the pulpit. However, all that proclamation is comes to bear upon the task of interpretation in the context of worship. Preaching is the Mary-like stance which gives the pastor balance amid the Martha-like busyness of his parish duties.<sup>14</sup> Instead of posing the ministry of the pulpit over against the broadly proclamatory ministry of the Church which embraces the laity, Michalson saw these as complementary. Indeed, "that's why we have preaching and teaching ministers — to mobilize us into the kinds of understanding that will make it possible for us to speak clearly, meaningfully in the confidence that our speaking will make it possible for someone else to live in the means of faith."<sup>15</sup> Unlike some who have broadened the definition of preaching to include other pastoral and educational tasks in a way which erodes the work of the pulpit, Michalson kept this at the center of his thought and life, expanding outward, and lodging the interpretive task associated with the pulpit in ever new scenes of ministry.

Preaching, in or out of the pulpit, "is historiography in an evangelical form, testifying to the good news of the eschatological event in such a way as to give rise to the eschatological history. To say it with utter simplicity, the preaching of the Gospel is the telling of a story of God's turning to man in Jesus of Nazareth. In a single report it tells us to whom we really belong and saves us from being lost. Preaching is the witness to Gospel."<sup>16</sup>

12. *Ibid.*

13. *The Hinge of History*, p. 201.

14. "Faith Must Be Risked", Lecture 4 in an unpublished series of lectures on "How Faith Works."

15. Unpublished sermon at the Ordination of Dr. Charles McCollough.

16. *The Hinge of History*, p. 213.

Christians preach because the historical character of the faith calls for it. Certain scientific truths are discoverable by investigation without reference to a testimony but other truths suffer without a witness. Christian truth belongs in the latter category, Michalson says, and he holds "that the possibility which our time has of living in the freedom of the new age stands or falls by our witness."<sup>17</sup>

The normative task of Christian preaching is so to express the grace of God that both the reputable and disreputable existence of men are embraced by it.<sup>18</sup> The history of preaching reflects a confusion about man's character as either reputable or disreputable. Thus now we find preachers appealing to the goodness in man, now preachers appealing to the badness in man. When preaching appeals exclusively to the reputable in man, it becomes moralizing — do this, you are capable of it. When preaching appeals to the disreputable in man, it is in danger of betraying the Church into futility and despair because of man's sin. Yet man is neither good nor bad but both. "Man is bad enough to need God; he is good enough to *recognize* his need of God."

Michalson continues with one of his favorite stories and sums up his understanding of the normative task of preaching.

It is said there has been a custom in Italy for a librettist and a composer to enter a town of a summer and write and produce an opera, casting the opera exclusively from the town's people and writing the opera in consideration of their capacities. This was not often simple. Rossini was once under the necessity of operating in this fashion in a town where one of his leading ladies could really sing only one reputable note, a middle B flat. Rossini produced the opera, and for the lady with the middle B flat an aria in which she sang the one note she could sing well. Monotonous? On the contrary, Rossini so surrounded that middle B flat with contrapuntal symphonics that the lady's miserable monotone was an angel voice out of heaven.

I mean only to say this, you men who preach. So call your town to commitment to the God revealed in Christ that in submitting the disreputable in their lives they may be made reputable through the all-embracing grace of God.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV. *The Subject Matter of Christian Preaching*

The subject matter of preaching is the history of Christianity

17. *Worldly Theology*, p. 183.

18. From an unpublished sermon on "The Normative Task of Christian Preaching."

19. *Ibid.*

exegeted so as to bring the present time into the new age of Christ's Lordship.<sup>20</sup> In this statement Michalson differs with the tradition (as venerable as Augustine and as questionable as some contemporary radio preachers) that the subject matter of preaching is the interpretation of the Bible. In defining the subject matter of preaching so broadly Michalson does run the risk of losing that focus on history which the interpretation of the Bible affords. However, Michalson's position does not tear preaching and the Bible utterly apart. He goes so far as to say that it is dangerous for communication to read the Bible aloud if one does so without preaching.<sup>21</sup> And in most of his own sermons there is reference to Biblical text, though often rather freely interpreted.

Michalson is actually trying to establish a more authentic relationship between preaching and the Bible than that of making the text the object of exegesis. This is part of his overall concern to deal with theology in a non-objectifying manner. He writes, "The Bible, without preaching, that is, translation, is not history. It does not yet form the life of the hearer with meaning."<sup>22</sup>

Michalson holds to his stand that the subject of preaching is history, informed by the Bible but not confined to the Bible. Jesus Christ stands at the center of Christian preaching, then, because he is "the hinge of history." He is "the ultimate paradigm by which all others are interpreted, the hinge by which all history hangs together."<sup>23</sup> Eschatological history supersedes Biblical history so radically that Biblical history is reduced to the status of World History or existential history. "Biblical history has lost its substantial significance as saving history now that God is present in Christ as the hinge of history."<sup>24</sup>

The New Testament does not leave us in doubt when we ask what one proclaims when he communicates the Gospel, according to Michalson. Substantially the same thing was being said everywhere by the apostles in brief, terse statements. They spoke of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ in such short statements as Acts 5:30-32. What God was doing in Jesus of Nazareth was declared in the *Kerygma*. This is what we proclaim when we proclaim the Gospel.

The task of a theologian is "to sift through the voluminous account for the authentic Kerygma. The task of the witness is to proclaim the Kerygma."<sup>25</sup>

If we "sift" through Michalson's voluminous accounts we find a

20. *Worldly Theology*, p. 181.

21. *The Hinge of History*, p. 229.

22. *The Hinge of History*, p. 229.

23. *The Hinge of History*, p. 46.

24. *The Hinge of History*, p. 47.

25. *The Hinge of History*, p. 218.

persistent attempt to discover and declare the Kerygma. One passage is especially notable in the way in which it sums up the gist of Michalson's understanding of theology as history.

Rather, Jesus of Nazareth is the open door by which the whole of history may live a history of wholeness. Not the date of old beginning of a new epoch, but the realization of truth about God and man which makes all epochs new beginnings. Not the end of physical death, but the end of historical death, which is death as the object of man's care, where the question of man's future is at issue. Not the end of sin, but the beginning of the end of sin because the end of the conditions of historical ambivalence which makes men prone to sin. Not the end of law but the end of the bondage to the law as an instrument for vindicating one's right to inherit the world. Not the end of dependence upon God, but the beginning of an existence in which *everything* is received from God, hence under responsibility to him. Therefore, not the end of God in the world but the end of God as the explanation of the world and the beginning of God as the source of the world's meaning.<sup>26</sup>

#### V. *The Strategy of Christian Preaching*

The strategy for proclamation comes directly from the subject matter of the proclamation itself.

The temptation is always present to latch on to some theory of communication and force proclamation into its mold. It is an old temptation and the eagerness with which some are seeking to adapt the Gospel to theories of communication from the electronic age, such as McLuhan's, is only its most recent expression. Michalson firmly resists this temptation since it tends to betray the creativity of the proclamation itself. Such attempts tend to assume that the Gospel is a "content" which may be placed in a "contemporary" form through a current theory of communication. This is to misunderstand the Gospel which is not an object, but which transcends the subject-object dichotomy. The Gospel is not only subject matter, but style.

The question of how Christians should turn to the world to supply the world with its proper end is best answered by the character of the Christian message itself.

One appeals in vain to methods of communication if they are not enlightened by the message. Public relations bureaus catalogue every soft spot in the public's sales resis-

tance and never have a positive suggestion for Christian communication. Writers may know every literary strategy from Aeschylus to Yeats and yet be powerless to evoke an act of Christian faith. . . . Before the physicist Helmholtz could arrive at the nature of vision, he had to do more than study the human eye. He had to study the properties of light. Similarly, the clue to the strategy of Christian communication is best found in the nature of the message itself.<sup>27</sup>

Michalson then proceeds to single out historiographical suggestions occurring in an analysis of the evangelical event and attempts to show they bear upon the task of communication. The Good News tells about who God is and to whom we belong. Out of the ultimate dimension of history it speaks to our needs and longings, but the Gospel is not directed to any question which may be asked at the moment. The Gospel is directed to the concern about the ultimate meaning of life and our relation to it. We must not confront the Gospel with questions we are asking in such a way as to obscure the questions of ultimate meaning and carry the understanding that "the truth about God and the truth about men involve each other."<sup>28</sup> "Can you improve that?" or "What makes you think it's better than other faiths?" are questions to which we can invent answers, but they're not necessarily the Gospel "for they do not communicate the knowledge of who God is and to whom, therefore, man belongs. They may satisfy curiosity, but they do not create history."<sup>29</sup>

After discussing the centrality of the Kerygma, Michalson discusses language and meaning. In proclaiming the Gospel one does not assume that on the basis of their prior acquaintance with the subject people will understand. One rather testifies with the expectation that what he is saying will provide the conditions for the understanding of the truth.<sup>30</sup> The language of the Gospel is more like that of the dynamics of present address than a chronicle of past history.

The event of God's turning to man to Christ, when expressed propositionally, would sound less like "Washington crossed the Delaware" and more like "I love you." The Gospel is the final news in the sense in which a wedding ceremony is final: you date it, as you date Washington's crossing the Delaware; but you commit your future, as in the marriage covenant, and you keep the commitment up-

27. *The Hinge of History*, p. 214.

28. *The Hinge of History*, p. 215.

29. *The Hinge of History* p. 216.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 224.



to-date by the repetition of the covenant in daily whispers of self-surrender.<sup>31</sup>

Decision is already implicit in the meaning of the Gospel and therefore in preaching one need *not* call for decision. Preaching calls for an act of will. One may reject that call but in doing so his decision has been made.<sup>32</sup> It seems to me that it will be truer to the Gospel to say that it does not so much call men to decision as to announce God's decision on man's behalf. Men are called to make decisions in the light of God's prior decision for them in Christ.

The tradition of the Gospel must be translated because "language which is true in one context can be false in another."<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately Michalson does not spell out very fully what he means by this. He certainly is arguing for "hermeneutical courage," — that is, the will to risk propositional clarity for the sake of motivational effectiveness. He says that the propositions of Christian communication are not true nor false; "they have rather the intention of moving hearers from one dimension of history to another, in the case of the Christian witness, from meaninglessness to meaning, from an inauthentic life to the covenant with God in Christ, from existential to eschatological history."<sup>34</sup>

Michalson concludes his discussion of the strategy of preaching with a story from Kierkegaard:

There was once a circus which caught fire. The director of the circus sent his clown to tell the crowd about the fire. The people, hearing the report from the lips of a clown, believed he was just telling one of his jokes so they simply sat there, a bit burned up over their inability to tell a prophet from a clown.

Part of the mystery of the Gospel is that God always seems to choose some clown to bear witness to it. God, however, unlike the director of the circus, does not leave us clowns to go it alone. He has pledged to make himself heard through the standardized poverty of our vocabularies.<sup>35</sup>

There are at least two other points about the strategy of preaching which are crucial. One is that worship forms the matrix, both in the ongoing weekly acts of public worship and definitely in the

31. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The other is that preaching gives rise to the mission of the Church. These matters are summed up succinctly and in relation to each other as follows:

When the [Christian] story is enacted through the drama of baptism, one is incorporated into the living body of Christ. When it is enacted through the drama of the Lord's Supper, the many are incorporated into each other and nourished by the real presence of the fullness of the Godhead bodily. . . . But in the Lord's Supper the church breaks the loaf as Christ's body was broken for the world. The church will continue to do so "until the Lord come," in order to fulfill the mission which Christ began and for which he gathered the Church, to feed the lost sheep.<sup>36</sup>

Michalson's comment on the strategy of preaching makes a major point about unfolding that strategy within the message itself. His statements are highly suggestive although they are a sketch rather than a full scale work in homiletics. Fortunately we are helped in learning more of Michalson's understanding of the strategy of preaching because he preached frequently and has left at least some evidence in manuscript of his sermonic endeavors. To an analysis of these we now turn.

## VI. *The Preaching of Carl Michalson*

The consequences of Christian preaching for Michalson are *nothing less* than a new history, an eschatological history.<sup>37</sup> The preaching of the Gospel tells of God's turning *to* man, and turning *over to* man responsibility for the world. "In Christ, *God delivers up* his rule to men, but he continues to reign."<sup>38</sup> History is "the medium in which man becomes free, intelligent, and *responsible*."<sup>39</sup> Michalson sums it up:

In short, a Christian is one who knows the fruits of the spirit. These fruits are structures of existence, not intellectual data. They are fully historical realities which are lived out in men. Among them are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the attributes of a life of freedom, a

36. *The Hinge of History*, p. 237. In this volume the chapter on "The Mission of the Church" follows the chapter on "The Creativity of Preaching."

37. *The Hinge of History*, p. 213.

38. *Worldly Theology*, p. 215.

39. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 138.

life of responsibility prepared for in God's final word to history in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>40</sup>

Christianity is fundamentally an attitude toward the world, and through changing attitudes Christian preaching changes the world. The goal of a new history through preaching is as radical as it is valid. But perhaps our severest criticism of Michalson is that he fails adequately to show the way to this goal. Before developing this criticism, however, we turn to a consideration of Michalson's own preaching.

Comments on Michalson's own preaching must take care at several points. First, given his understanding of preaching as any communication with an intent to present the Gospel, it would be possible to include all of his utterances. In this current section of our discussion we are limiting ourselves to his preaching from the pulpit on the grounds that the broader range of his thought is being dealt with elsewhere in this volume, and also because his understanding of proclamation allows for the validity of such a critique of pulpit expression. Another difficulty is that we have only a small sheaf of the transcriptions of sermons out of the hundreds he must have preached through his lifetime. Moreover, with Michalson perhaps more than with most men, much of his persuasiveness lay in the style of his presentation. We shall try to keep these matters in mind as we proceed.

Our analysis is based upon transcriptions of the following sermons variously titled and annotated. 1) "The Normative Task of Christian Preaching" (Romans 7:15-8:2); 2) "What it Means to be a Protestant"; 3) "Born of the Virgin Mary" (Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:8-12); 4) "The Debts no Man can Pay"; 5) "We Are on Strike Against Self-Immolation (Mark 10:35-45, John 13:1-5, 12:17); 6) "Advent Aphasia," a meditation inspired by Ingmar Bergman and Gerard Manley Hopkins; 7) "Advent Atheism," a meditation inspired by Soren Kierkegaard and James Baldwin; 8) "You Can Have a Heart in Your Head" (Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-32); 9) "Tragedy and Blessedness: The Paradox of the Christian Order of Priorities" (Luke 14:7-11); 10) "The Ordination of Dr. Charles McCollough"; 11) "The Legacy of Adam" (James 1:5-8, 16-21); 12) "A Meditation on the Death of John Harden," and "A Prayer for These Times" (Psalm 95 and Matthew 6). Two other manuscripts, "How to Love Your Neighbor" and "Can Modern Man any Longer Pray?," include material which not doubt he may have preached but they appear in their present form to be lectures. These two latter manuscripts raise an interesting point given Michalson's definition of preaching and his character. When was Mike preaching and when was he lecturing? He confessed off the cuff that he was never sure himself just what the difference between a sermon and a theological lecture was. He did seem to

40. *Ibid.*, p. 139. *Wordly Theology* further elaborates this view.

"preach" in his lectures if by that we mean that the passion to communicate the Gospel was always present. He also sometimes "lectured" in his preaching if by that we mean that a serious pedagogical intention was involved.

What observations can we make about the material now before us? The sermons are topical rather than expository. Their form is that of the essay although they include passages virtually poetic in form and other sections which are exquisite parables. The structure is almost without exception determined by sequential logic and the processes of a finely honed academic reasoning. Only in the meditation of the death of John Harden does the crack in reason become stylistically evident, but even there, though Michalson borders on incoherence, the darkness flees before his persistent lucidity.

The sermons gather around the propositions which interact with each other and which attract further elucidations, quotations, stories and literary allusions. For example, the sermon, "What it means to be a Protestant," begins with the observation that the spirit of revolt is abroad in the world. He then defines a Protestant as a rebel *for* a cause. The points of the sermon are as follows: 1) a Protestant believes that *God is our guardian*; 2) a Protestant believes that *the Gospel is our guide*; 3) finally, a Protestant believes *grace is a gift*. In the second point Michalson makes a series of those sharp distinctions of which he was so capable. "The Bible is not science; it is wisdom." "Nor is the Bible history; it is news." "The Bible is not even revelation; it is witness to the revelation." The sermon closes with a reference to personal experience in which his father acted in a reconciling way. Then the main points of the sermon are restated with an added epigram from Luther, "we intend to die by this faith; why should we not live by it!" While not all of Michalson's sermons have a propositional element so sharply outlined as this they tend to be dialectical in character with a contrapuntal interaction.

The sermons are marked by a humor larger than funny stories (although he delighted in those). His wit sparkled through the whole of a typical discourse. The sermons are also characterized by a rhetorical flair for memorable phrases, i.e., Protestants tend to be vogue on the outside, and vague on the inside. Or "with that prayer [our Lord's] like criminals in despair, we cast ourselves on costly mercy."

The sermons are essentially literary in style and tone, and of a high order judged by the criteria Michalson himself set forth. "A man who hears a sermon will understand only what he grasps in the moment of utterance . . . nothing can be allowed to disrupt the intelligibility of the word he speaks — no archaism, no irrelevancy, no obscurity."<sup>41</sup> Actually I have the impression that Michalson would have broken his own rule if he felt it necessary to maintain the

41. *The Hinge of History*, pp. 228, 229.

attention of his hearers and to motivate them. Occasionally there are archaisms, irrelevancy and obscurity in his sermons but somehow they do not disrupt his intelligibility. He was master of intentional ambiguity, hiding meanings in sentences you would spend weeks mulling over.

Michalson also said that there is more communication of the Gospel in the act of preaching than in the content of the sermon.<sup>42</sup> This is one of his most perceptive, potentially revolutionary statements. In this case, at least, the medium is the message. A human being, straining to share the good news of God, says more in the effort than his words can carry.

Michalson was his own best illustration of the point. There was about him a passion to communicate. And what he had to say was not some "thing" nor some data to be memorized. It was a truth which called for direct, personal, face to face encounter. His freedom from manuscripts in lecturing and preaching may be seen not merely as an attempt at improved communication but part and parcel of what he wanted to say. This message is something between us, fresh and personal, breaking down barriers between us, calling for response.

No one who ever saw Mike in action is likely to forget him. His wiry frame tensed, his hands spinning the dialectic from within him like a spider working its web, his eyes piercing, his voice rising wistfully, he could command your attention almost against your will.

His eyes communicated — dark, direct. They searched you out, read your mind, probed your past, and if somehow something in your eyes could see it, they gave you a future. His voice was slight and carried with it a rising inflection at the end of sentences, a Minnesota-Scandinavian trait which his sister picked up when she transposed his words into an oratorio. Hearing his words in music you recalled how musical were his words. Michalson would have called his voice the voice of history — soft, insistent, hinting, making no claims for itself. He argues against preachers who spoke out forcefully by using the voice of nature. He meant that the communication of the Gospel should be in a tone more like "peace be still" than in that of a storm at sea. He had a point. But what was dramatic in Michalson in a small lecture room or with a good public address system would be disastrous as a theory of speech. It is possible to use an "historical" voice and still project audibly to everyone present.

To a generation which grew up on comic books, later to be extolled as Pop Culture, he was a Billy Batson — boyish physique, dark hair and eyes, cleft chin. Students sat entranced, at least some students did, expecting him at any moment to say "Shazam!", the magic word which would send down the bolt of lightning and transform him into Captain Marvel. He said "history" instead, and although some deny that lightning struck to reveal the commanding

stature of the man, most of his critics agree that they could hear a kind of thunder behind his wispy voice.

As an oral communicator he was without parallel among the systematic theologians of his time. Others had their rich and unique gifts. But in his mastery of his material, freedom to interact with his congregation or audience, range of vocal and visual expressiveness, and vitality of expression, as well as of ideas, he was without peer.

He spoke as a man with a word from the Lord.

## VII. *Evaluation*

Evaluation of theology of preaching is always complex and doubly so in the case of a man who was killed while still in full stride toward the resolution of crucial issues. Michalson himself articulated a fundamental dilemma upon his return from the March into Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965.

Through his career Michalson had been sensitive to the question of man in his relationships. His Master's thesis was on the concept of responsibility in Plato. He discussed the meaning of society in existentialist thought. In his major works he set forth a direction for theology as history. But in his own life he tended to keep aloof from social involvement, and his participation in the last leg of the March into Montgomery was a new step for him. When he returned he was a different man. In his report to the Drew community he repeated, "I have been baptized, I have been baptized." For the first time this man who had traced the concept of freedom in Plato had heard American Negroes in the South sing, "O Freedom." There were meanings there he had not known before. He had to come to grips with them. I shall never forget the dilemma he felt and which he posed for us that day. He said, in effect, "If theology does not learn now to deal with events like this, it will die. But if theology does begin to deal with events like this, I simply do not know what it will do to theology as we have known it in the past." Not long after that he was dead.

The question of what course Michalson would have taken had he lived is enough to keep one awake nights. But there is no earthly morning to that night. We simply do not know, and nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of Michalson than to allow such speculation to short-circuit our continuing theological quest. What is called for is a rigorous critical examination of what he left with us, both published and unpublished, drawing inferences where there is evidence to support them, but in no case allowing the sentiment "had he lived" to obscure our critical judgment or cloak our own prejudices.

Let us look at the internal questions of Michalson's theology. Judged by the questions he himself raised, how does he stand?

First, if preaching is the hermeneutical mode by which God's presence in Jesus of Nazareth is kept up to date, then Michalson's

own sermons qualify. Michalson does not attempt generally to snatch Jesus out of the first century and modernize him. Rather he seeks to deal honestly with Jesus in his milieu and show what that may mean for us today. For example, consider the concluding lines of his sermon on Advent Atheism: "In this season when the children in church pageants draw back the swaddling clothes from the face of the holy baby, they must show us a face of black, or we may well conclude our faith is not true, revelation has not been borne, God does not exist." On the other hand, Michalson's image of Christ returning on a mushroom-shaped cloud is powerful as symbolism but nonetheless mythological and weak in calling men to responsibility in a nuclear age.

Second, if the subject of preaching is Christian history exegeted so as to help create a future, Michalson's sermons qualify better in the former case than the latter. Certainly Michalson tends to deal with some aspect of Christian history as the center of his sermon rather than with a biblical text systematically exegeted. He also tends to stress present meaning rather than past, although he is on intimate terms with the Fathers of the Church and knows how to quote them deftly. Whether he is equally effective in opening up the new age of which he speaks is a matter to which we must return shortly.

Third, if preaching is speech event calling for extreme care in listening and uttering, Michalson qualifies at a high level. Michalson had an uncanny ability to set a theological statement alongside an existential situation in such a way as to lodge the one with the other inextricably. Reading Aquinas, for example, one is minded to compare a statement from one section of the *Summa* with another. Hearing Michalson, the context for which one tends to look for verification is not another page but relationships with one's mate or friends. His capacity for genuine insight generally kept his verbal facility from glibness. He could take your breath away with an authentic speech event as in his unforgettable, "Hurrah for Harden!" One's understanding of resurrection could never be the same after that.

Now we must ask, is this imbalance present only in the few sermons we have and corrected in the whole of his work? Unfortunately not. Throughout Michalson's work, with all their stress on man, the shaper of history, man remains more shaped than shaping. How does this come about? Several factors at least must be taken into account.

Michalson defines Christianity as an attitude toward the world made possible in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>43</sup> True enough, but not the whole truth. Christianity is also action, God's and man's. Michalson so stresses the attitudinal side of Christianity that even when he calls for action the action tends to be that of changing attitudes. I do not doubt for a moment that attitudinal change is basic but I do not believe it is sufficient to change the course of history.

Michalson has said that the normative task of Christian preaching is to call people to commitment so "that in submitting the disreputable in their lives they may be made reputable through the all-embracing grace of God."<sup>44</sup> Judged by this norm, Michalson's sermons are out of balance on the side of the disreputable in man. To put it another way, by far the heavier stress lies on man's weakness and the limits of his efforts rather than in what man may do through God's grace to shape society. Where Michalson does mention social issues, they tend to be illustrative of certain deep underlying truths about man which do not yield to man's responsiveness. For example, Michalson's reference to the United Nations stresses what this forum cannot do rather than what it can within its limits, albeit this is not intended to be a denigration of the international body. When man is called to action the action tends to be a call to be more sensitive to other people, a symbolic act (pulling aside the sheet from the black baby), or speaking. With all his talk about man as one who acts, man in Michalson's sermons remains essentially passive. Therefore, Michalson's own preaching does not really help much in opening up the new age which is to be the goal of preaching.

Further, I believe there is in Michalson's thought a latent theology of revolution which never quite comes off. He stresses man the rebel, but then details man's rebellion against ecclesiastical rather than governmental institutions. Michalson's concept of history, for all its dimensionality, lacks political realism. Michalson touched history, teased meaning from it, but failed to grasp its political actuality. The unfortunate aspect of this is not so much that his work appeared outmoded by the "political theology" and theology of revolution that came to the fore with such persons as Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone (that would be sheer faddishness), but that the fully historical potential of his work remains obscure.

At the base of this problem, perhaps, lies Michalson's understanding of reality. He argues that the lightning which led Benjamin Franklin to discover electricity was not the same kind of reality as that which drove Martin Luther into a monastery.<sup>45</sup>

Michalson will argue that the distinction between nature and history is between two different structures of reality and not a distinction between two different kinds of reality.<sup>46</sup> However, as the subject works out in Michalson's thought, a *de facto* distinction between two different kinds of reality tends to emerge inasmuch as Michalson concentrates on the question of meaning. Ultimately reality cannot be reduced to meaning. The phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden may offer more help here than

44. "The Normative Task of Christian Preaching."

45. *The Hinge of History*, p. 35. For a fuller discussion of the reality question as it affects the communication of the Gospel, see my introduction to Gerhard Ebeling, *On Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 7-11, and my "Theological Exploration" in *The Swinging Church* (Nashville: Tidings, 1970), pp. 26-38).

46. *The Hinge of History*, p. 31.



we have accepted. Reality may be understood as a multilayered structure through which meaning circulates. So understood a phenomenon such as lightning, or a work of art, or an event would yield its meaning as it was investigated at various levels such as the empirical, verbal, visual, psychological, social and metaphysical dimensions. If Michalson had such a view in mind it does not come off in his writings where we tend to find "nature" and "history" warring with each other. In calling for a more comprehensive understanding of reality I understand that the question is debatable, of course, and I simply want to draw attention to it and declare the need for further investigation of the matter rather than to foreclose on an answer.

Internal criticism of Michalson's theology of preaching then discloses that his performance was at a high level of consistency in regard to his understanding of preaching and its character as speech event. He appears to be more effective in exegeting the history of Christianity to provide insight into our situation than in eliciting action to change it.

It should also be said that Michalson's thought is striking in the way in which he grasps the wholeness of theology in preaching. The "how" of the sermon flowed directly from its subject matter. The continuity of his concern for preaching stands out.

It also seems entirely possible that Michalson's theology of preaching or doctrine of the Word, if you will, could become his major enduring contribution to Christian thought. Although his "theology as history" enterprise was the most visible aspect of his work, it may be his understanding of preaching which proves most illuminating and lasting.

### VIII. *Conclusion*

If we look at Michalson's theology of preaching as a whole and set it in the perspective of recent thought, it is evident that he made a major contribution to the subject.

For example, he is more thorough than Reinhold Niebuhr in dealing with the theological rootage of preaching, though not as concrete in his applications as that master. He is as adept as Paul Tillich in rendering his theology into sermonic form, although he is not as thorough as Tillich in dealing with the ontological question. He is more specific than Gerhard Ebeling about the ways in which theology enforces the act of preaching, although not as comprehensive as Ebeling in historical matters. Although the quantity of his work is much smaller than Karl Barth's, Michalson's doctrine of the Word rivals that of Barth for its thoroughness, vitality and its relevance to our situation.

I intend by these statements to suggest points of comparison and further inquiry knowing that it is not possible in the scope of this article to spell out all their implications. This much is clear, to gain

the dimensions of Carl Michalson's theology of preaching he must be set in the context of the gigantic theological figures of his age.

The reasons for this include the following. 1) His concern for preaching is not an appendage to his thought but, like that of Augustine, is the nervous system that circulates through the entire corpus of his work. 2) At every point defined as crucial to theology of preaching Michalson's achievement offers insight and guidance. 3) Michalson qualified uniquely both as a professional theologian and as a superb communicator to laymen.

I would like to close this essay with a memory and a hope.

I was in Norway on a preaching and lecturing tour when my wife called. Her voice was muted with a forced serenity as it came to me across the miles. She told me softly that one of my colleagues had been killed in a plane crash. I caught my breath. We could afford the loss of none. It was Carl Michalson. The world crashed around me. A teacher, a friend, a colleague, a hero was gone. I did not know if I should or could continue on my mission. I turned to the Bible as an alcoholic must turn to drink, but I was mocked. I talked into the morning with the layman who was traveling with me and I will always be grateful to him for listening then. At the darkest moment I was asking, "What do you do when this happens? What do you do in the face of tragedy, when an utterly arbitrary happening leaves an enormous gap in your life? What do you do when you can do nothing?" A voice as clear and straightforward as Michalson's own seemed to say to me, "You preach the Word." Suddenly I began to understand as I never had before how the first Christians must have felt after the crucifixion. And I saw that the Christian response to death is to preach the Word that does not die. I knew then that I must continue my preaching and teaching no matter what the cost.

"Preach the Word!" I regard that as Michalson's legacy in death as in life, a legacy which must be shared by all who knew him. Therefore I must close with hope. The hope is that the dilemma which Carl posed upon his return from Montgomery will be resolved in the direction of theology which does deal with events like that. Theology will become action in the midst of our existence and not theorizing about it. Theology will expand its vocabulary to include not only books but social strategies to express the meaning of its key terms like faith, freedom, grace, justice. While this may mean for the moment eclipse of theologies which are worked out in abstraction from daily events, in the long run it may mark the birth pangs of a truly worldly theology by means of which faith is expressed in the midst of life. And I hope that the work of Carl Michalson will continue to inform that task for then it would be likely to remain faithful to its origin and sensitive to its heritage.

# An Acoustical Affair

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“Faith is an acoustical affair.” This commentary by Luther on Paul’s claim in Romans 10 that “faith comes by hearing” is cited more than once in *The Hinge of History*.<sup>1</sup> It calls attention to the central significance of Christian witness. It implies the existence of the church as witness community and emphasizes the importance of preaching as a primary mode of witnessing.

At first glance these doctrines may not appear as major or central in the corpus of Carl Michalson’s thought. But they are clear and unmistakable.

My own understanding of the task of systematic theology is that it is a totalizing operation within a highly complex historical process. Historically speaking, neither systematic theology nor Biblical exegesis has been dramatically effective in the development of Christian history. Preaching, broadly conceived as the practical encounter of the world by the church’s interpretation of its faith, has been the real vanguard. That is why one can say that one studies theology not to learn theology but to learn to preach.<sup>2</sup>

This central concern with preaching not only illuminates a segment of Michalson’s theology — his personal witness — but speaks an important word to us today, as some theologians question the significance of the church and relevancy of preaching.

In the thought of Michalson faith is a matter of witnessing and hearing — witnessing which is understood as service and hearing which is understood as obedience. The church is a community committed to the task of witnessing. And preaching is a primary act of witness, by which obedient hearing is elicited.

1. *The Hinge of History*, pp. 217 and 237. It is also quoted on pages 194 and 207 of *Worldly Theology*.
2. “The Task of Systematic Theology Today,” *The Centennial Review*, VIII, 2 (Spring 1964), p.192.

The life and work of the church today would be greatly enhanced if these truths were held with clarity and conviction by clergy and laity alike.

I.

The church is the new people of God, called into existence by the resurrection of Christ. The church, in response to its call, witnesses to its faith in the resurrected Christ.<sup>3</sup> The existence of the church is essential to the historical persistence of the faith. "The truth of Christian history can be lost for want of a witness to interpret it."<sup>4</sup>

There is a necessity about the existence of the church. It may be riddled by ambiguities, rigidly encased in obsolescent forms. But church there must be, a community without whose witness a truth might be lost, a truth the hearing of which is essential to the life of humanity.

Still we must always be sensitive to the ambiguities in the community's life. "The church both is and is not the body of Christ; it both is and is not a branch of which Christ is the vine; it both is and is not the eschatological community."<sup>5</sup> It can never be identified, then, with the Kingdom. The church does not exist simply in order to maintain its own life. It is a means in the service of a further end, it is "a means to the Kingdom of God."<sup>6</sup>

It is of the nature of means to be used up in the achievement of ends. So the church, as means to the Kingdom, will wither away. What is the nature of the end in which the church is to lose itself?

"One day the church must allow itself to be dissolved in a mature state."<sup>7</sup> This way of stating the case runs the risk of identifying particular political programs, certain "secular" achievements, as the Kingdom to be realized. This is another identification which we dare not make. For the Kingdom is not "the sum of socio-political gains."<sup>8</sup> Utopianism is as much an error as ecclesiastical arrogance. Still the goal toward which the church works is a real one. It will not be satisfied "until the world is with it at the Lord's table,"<sup>9</sup> or until the world itself becomes a church.<sup>10</sup>

Actually, these statements are little more than hints. The social responsibility of the church can be stated more fully. But first it must be kept clearly in mind that the primary task of the church is

3. *The Rationality of Faith*, pp. 52 ff.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

5. *The Hinge of History*, p. 243.

6. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 129.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

8. *The Hinge of History*, p. 245.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

10. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 148.

to bear witness to its faith in Christ. "This is the thing of which the church is most confident, and this is *its only incontestable role in the world.*"<sup>11</sup> This is a strong and direct statement. It would be presumptuous to claim to know what Michalson would say today. But this is what he has said. And some of us believe it is a word that needs frequent and emphatic statement today. The church has one primary area of competence: its faith. It has one primary task, and it is the only institution in society committed to that task: witnessing to its faith.

However, this conviction must not be interpreted as either irresponsible withdrawal from social issues or naïve simplism with respect to the way in which social issues are resolved. The church must not identify itself with any particular ideology or any specific political program. But the witness of the church must be both prophetic and redemptive.

"By prophetic I mean we must insist that a maximum of justice be achieved within the concrete conditions of this present time."<sup>12</sup> Such a statement will not be sufficient for many Christians. Some will want to become more directly involved in the actual struggle for social change. And we can hardly deny that there are varieties of vocation. Some churchmen will, indeed, be activists. But Michalson cautions that "prophetism is not activist: it does not believe that nothing is being done simply because men are doing nothing."<sup>13</sup>

The second aspect of Christian witness is redemptive. "By our redemptive role I mean that we must proclaim the reality of God's mercy to a world from which mercy is always a waning reality."<sup>14</sup> This may require that the church manifest the virtues of calm and patience, virtues which are always in short supply. And if churchmen themselves protest impatiently that it is irresponsible to be calm and waitful in such a time, it can only be replied that God may be acting in His own way. The task of the church at times may simply be to provide occasion for "prayer and fasting, and for the steady witness of the believing community."<sup>15</sup> These are the concluding words to *The Hinge of History*.

## II.

With such an understanding of the church and its work, it is clear that Michalson must also place high value on preaching. Proclamation is central to "the interpretive ministry of the word in the church,"<sup>16</sup>

11. *The Hinge of History*, p. 244. Italics mine.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

16. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 153.

which is in fact its primary task. And preaching is the principal mode of interpretation.

It is worth repeating the distinctive value which he gives to preaching. To preach faith in Christ is "the thing of which the church is most confident, and this is its only incontestable role in the world."<sup>17</sup> The one truth which the church knows most about is its own faith. This does not mean that churchmen cannot become knowledgeable about other matters. Indeed, it is probably the vocation of some churchmen — lay and clergy — to achieve such qualification in many worldly matters. But the distinctive work of the church is to proclaim the faith which has called it into being. There is no other institution in society which has this function. There are political, social, economic institutions, with their own particular roles to fulfill. The church cannot do their work for them, though no doubt it will work with them. But the church's special task is to keep alive the Christian option in every generation.

This is complex and demanding work. And preaching is not the whole task of witness. The sacraments have their important place in the life and work of the church. Teaching and other disciplines are part of the community's witness. But preaching is clearly and unmistakably central.

Is it necessary to underscore how much we need to hear this word today? We must not presume to guess what Michalson would emphasize now. But this is what he has said — and clearly. And we sorely need to hear it again.

The church today is suffering from confusion as to its primary task. We need to know that our only "incontestable role" is to give the world the chance to hear the gospel. And we need to know that preaching is the principal method of communication.

This is no simple or easy task. The burden of Michalson's theology was to articulate the gospel in contemporary terms. Those who have wrestled with his thought know that it is far from simple. The burden of his brilliant sermons was to proclaim the gospel in terms not only contemporary but compelling. He was deeply committed to this "acoustical affair." And all who have heard his sermons have been moved to hear in obedience.

What, then, is preaching? "To say it with utter simplicity, the preaching of the gospel is the telling of a story of God's turning to man in Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>18</sup> The simplicity of this turning to man, however, may be deceptive. It involved the whole ministry of Christ, his death and resurrection, the serious meaning of which cannot be easily articulated. "The prototype of all preaching is God's word to man in the exaltation of Christ on the cross. God speaks in the cross and man hears in the resurrection: This is the simple event of God's

17. *The Hinge of History*, p. 244.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

proclamation.”<sup>19</sup> Simple, indeed! And no less “simple” is the task of repeating this proclamation.

The gospel to be proclaimed has its own particular content. And here again Michalson speaks a word to which the church needs to give close attention. We ought not to suppose that the gospel offers the answer to all questions which we are capable of asking. It is rather the answer to questions having to do with “the ultimate meaning of life and a man’s relation to it.”<sup>20</sup> There may be many significant issues which trouble us. Indeed, our society may be torn by them. But the gospel is not necessarily addressed to that kind of issue. In fact, many people may not even be bothered by the question with which the gospel is concerned. In that case, the first part of our preaching may be to arouse the questions. For the matters to which the church must address itself are those of ultimate concern. To recognize the limits of our message enables us to focus its primary word.

“It is not all the news there is; it is simply the best news, the saving truth.”<sup>21</sup> This is why it is so important that we tell the good news well. This is why we must hear it obediently. Our telling and our hearing together constitute “an acoustical affair.”

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19. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

# Applying the Maieutic Method to History

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It was Kierkegaard who in the last century drew the distinction most sharply between ontology and history, between truth as eternal ideas in the mind essentially independent of man's existence in time and truth as historical event, a distinction that was to fascinate Carl Michalson and provide the theme that emerges again and again in the writings of his last few years, *The Hinge of History*, *The Rationality of Faith* and *Worldly Theology*. Yet Michalson, while he polemized against the ontological and for the historical, seemed strangely intrigued by the *maieutic* approach (*maia*, midwife; *maieutikos*, pertaining to midwifery) which, according to Kierkegaard's interpretation, is the very hallmark of the Socratic ontology and idealist thought. Socrates was a "midwife" to the mind, employing the obstetric force of questioning to assist ideas ontologically implicit in the mind to emerge into rational consciousness. How is it possible to reconcile Michalson's well-known commitment to doing theology in terms of history alone with a method traditionally wedded to a strictly ontological doctrine of knowledge?

## I. *The Kierkegaardian Divide*

Intent to show the contrast between the pedagogical method employed by Socrates and the method he felt to be inherent in the Christian view of revelation, Kierkegaard pointed to the dialogue in the *Meno* as demonstrating that Socrates regards every man as being inherently in possession of the truth. His doctrine of recollection views all learning and inquiry as a kind of remembering. "One who is ignorant needs only a reminder to help him come to himself in the consciousness of what he knows. Thus the Truth is not introduced into the individual from without, but was within him."<sup>1</sup> By artful, dialectical questioning of a slave boy, Socrates is able to elicit knowledge of geometry which was previously only implicit in the boy's mind. In so doing he demonstrates his theory that the good

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 11.



teacher operates essentially in the role of a midwife, not supplying information so much as skillfully assisting at the birth of ideas in the minds of others. "The underlying principle of all questioning is that the one who is asked must have the Truth in himself and be able to acquire it by himself."<sup>2</sup> The teacher is simply the occasion for self-discovery. Moreover, the *time* in which this discovery takes place is of no significance. History in its discreteness is dissolved by eternity, "for as soon as I discover I have known the Truth from eternity without being aware of it, the same instant this moment of occasion is hidden in the Eternal, and so incorporated with it that I cannot even find it so to speak, even if I sought it; because in my eternal consciousness there is neither here nor there, but only *ubique et nusquam* [everywhere and nowhere]."<sup>3</sup>

Kierkegaard contrasts this Socratic view with one in which the *moment in time* has decisive significance because the Eternal "came into existence in this moment."<sup>4</sup> The moment is not simply the occasion for discovering latent truth but rather the learner is "destitute of the Truth up to the very moment of his learning it." And if this be the case, "if the learner is to acquire the Truth, the Teacher must bring it to him; and not only so, but he must also give him the condition necessary for understanding it. For if the learner were in his own person the condition for understanding the Truth he need only recall it."<sup>5</sup>

Thus Kierkegaard lays the epistemological groundwork for revelation and the incarnate God who came to man as Teacher and Savior, the epistemological basis which was to serve as the foundation stone of dialectical theology and provide the rationale for its strictures against natural theology. Man is bereft of the Truth apart from historical moments in which eternity has intersected time, moments which become the focus of historical experience, the clue to history. "Such a moment has a peculiar character. It is brief and temporal indeed, like every moment; it is transient as all moments are; it is past, like every moment in the next moment. And yet it is decisive."<sup>6</sup>

The incompatibility of the two approaches was clear to Kierkegaard, as it was to the later dialectical theologians, and he saw himself as championing the authority of the moment in time against his idealist opponents who had opted for eternal reason, and who were thus Socratics though they claimed to be Christians. The idealists found it as impossible as did Lessing to allow the "accidental truths of history" to stand in judgment over the eternal truths of reason; therefore final authority had to be vested in reason, while Kierkegaard for his part rejoiced in the paradoxical logic of the

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 15f.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Incarnation, in which the concrete Moment in time becomes the plumb line by which Eternity is measured.

## II. The Historical Form of Rationality

Michalson also champions the role of history in Christian faith. Indeed, much of his theological effort is devoted to preserving the integrity of history against those methods which would turn history into a manifestation of a more eternal realm — nature or ontology — and reduce historical meaning to the outworkings of ontological principles. The accidental character of history, along with the relativities which that accidental character implies, must be maintained against temptations to wrest meaning from history by reducing it to ontology. Not only his well-known methodological distinction between the structuring of reality as “nature” and the structuring of reality as “history,”<sup>7</sup> but also his attack on Heinrich Ott’s employment of the later Heidegger to reduce history to ontology,<sup>8</sup> echo his commitment to the Kierkegaardian divide. It is the “moment in time” which has priority. Thus Michalson sees himself as taking up Troeltsch’s challenge to let the historical method, with all its relativities, inform the theological enterprise like a yeast which will transform and finally burst the lump of traditional theological procedure.<sup>9</sup> He seeks to do theology in terms of history alone. Like Friedrich Gogarten, he insists that “theology must look for nothing and believe in nothing that is not history.”<sup>10</sup> Yet this requires an appropriate method of interpretation which can do justice to history, that is, which can bring out the authority of history as a source of meaning. And precisely herein lies the difficulty. Meaning inevitably involves ordering, patterning. If there is no discernible pattern in things, if they are completely random, if there is no *rationality* or none can be introduced, then meaning is impossible. Clearly a method is needed which will do justice to the discreteness of historical moments while allowing the mind to grasp their *inherent* rationality, not an alien rationality imposed on them from without.

Michalson found the appropriate mode of rationality in the German philosopher-historian, Wilhelm Dilthey, whose approach Michalson enriched with the perspectives of the New Hermeneutic and phenomenology. This combination, moreover, led Michalson to a new insight, *viz.*, that *Kierkegaard’s dichotomy between the maieutic*

7. *The Rationality of Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), pp. 24ff.

8. *Worldly Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967), pp. 95ff. This essay first appeared as “Theology as Ontology and as History,” in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 136ff.

9. Cf. Carl Michalson, *The Hinge of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959) p. 21.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

and Christian approaches is not a necessary one. Or, more precisely, that *midwifery*, when practiced on history rather than on the mind, can deliver history of its meaning and at the same time bring faith to birth in the knowing subject. To be sure, Kierkegaard also made extensive use of the maieutic method, which is why commentators are wont to call him "the Christian Socrates." Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard the maieutic remains on the level of propaedeutic, on the level of "indirect witness," which must be superseded by a direct witness if the seeker is to move beyond self-awareness to authentic existence.<sup>11</sup> But here Michalson would appear to part company with Kierkegaard. For it is clear that he regards the maieutic method, when applied to the historic documents of Christian faith and their proclamation, as itself leading to participation in faith and the authentic existence which faith brings. What for Kierkegaard was only preliminary becomes for Michalson the open sesame to the goal itself. How does the method work?

Dilthey developed his historiography in conscious opposition to the regnant positivism of 19th-century historical research. Positivism claimed to be getting at "what really happened" by reducing historical documents to those facts which were, in principle at least, empirically demonstrable. Dilthey countered by suggesting that such an approach fails to reach the essential subject matter of history because it ignores the question of how historical accounts are formed in the first place. Historical documents are the residue of meaning, the *sediment* left behind which speaks of the significance historical events had for contemporaries. It follows that the way into documents must involve "understanding," a willingness to participate in the meaning-event which originally created them. And that requires neither an objectivist approach, which looks at the outer shell of events and assumes it has exhausted their significance by describing that shell in modern categories of objective observation, nor a subjectivist approach, which is content to reflect on the subjective stimulus past events afford the present-day thinker,<sup>12</sup> but an act of interpretive understanding in which the historian "negotiates between his sentiment for historical meaning and the sedimentation of meaning which encounters his sentiment."<sup>13</sup>

"Sentiment for meaning" is Michalson's term for the inevitable questions which the interpreter brings with him into the encounter with historical accounts and which enable him to play midwife to history. The *sediment-sentiment* combination is of course a play on words and may sound a bit contrived. Nevertheless, with it Michalson expresses in concise form what for him is at stake in historical interpretation and sets the stage for the analogy between historical reason

11. Cf. *The Witness of Kierkegaard* (New York: Association Press, 1960), p. 127.

12. Dilthey rejects introspection as a method of historical understanding (cf. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 76).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

so defined and the kind of "rationality" which is operative in faith. The sentiment for meaning serves as the obstetric tools to bring to birth in the present the traces of meaning implicit in historical sources. Michalson refers to James M. Robinson's cogent summary of this modified Diltheyan method:

Twentieth-century history need not surrender the term "objective" to nineteenth-century historiography. Scholarly objectivity does not reside simply in classifying the particular in categories with wider acceptance than one's own individual view, for such a procedure is blind to the two-fold subjectivity residing in the categories of one's school of thought or day and age, and in the pervasive subjectivity of Western rationalism, which blunts true encounter into a merely outward stimulus for one's inner *a priori* faculties. Instead, objectivity resides in a complete openness to what the creative historical event has to say. This involves a willingness to listen for underlying intentions and the understanding of existence they convey, with an ear sharpened by one's own awareness of the problems of human existence, and a willingness to suspend one's own answers and one's own understanding of existence sufficiently to grasp as a real possibility what the other is saying. Thus one's historical involvement, not one's disinterestedness, is the instrument leading to objectivity . . . <sup>14</sup>

By way of this involvement the "intentionality," the meaning and significance which made the historical events worth recording in the first place, is enabled to come to light as the motivating substance of history. The "priority of the object" is defined not in terms of its externality but as an original event of meaning. Were there no such event the historical reason would have nothing upon which to focus; it presupposes the presence of human meaning. Historical accounts are not simply Rorschach blots into which one appropriately reads one's own subjectivity. They are the occasion for discovering both what moved and motivated men then, and — as the sentiment for meaning coincides with the sediment of meaning — what can give existence meaning in the present. "The task of the historian . . . is to stir up the sentiment of meaning in the sedimentation of events, and not to celebrate the sedimentation."<sup>15</sup>

14. *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 96; quoted in *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 73.

15. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 64.

### III. *Historical Rationality and the Rationality of Faith*

When this method is applied to the documents of the Christian faith, claims Michalson, the pattern of (a) encounter with the historical materials, (b) participation in their intentionality, and (c) appropriation of their creativity in the present, parallels almost exactly the structure of the event of faith. Indeed, "historical understanding is so similar to the way a man of faith understands as almost to be identical with it. Therefore, collision between faith and reason within the structure of history is reduced virtually to nothing. The mysteries of faith are in some sense only as mysterious as the mysteries of history . . . . The form of historical understanding is in some sense also the structure of faith."<sup>16</sup> Hence, it is possible to argue on Michalson's grounds that the maieutic approach, when applied to history and powered by the genuine questions of the seeker, serves not only as a preparation for the gospel; it is the event in which, at the same moment, the gospel is heard and responded to and faith comes to birth. Michalson can agree with Kierkegaard, on the one hand, that the Truth is not to be found as a latent possibility within the mind of man, and therefore the maieutic method applied to the non-historical realm of ideas will bring forth no solution which is not distorted by man's existential situation. At the same time, however, he can insist that the maieutic method, when turned toward history, brings results which are so compatible with the structure of the faith-event that this form of historical rationality can serve as *the* model for the rationality of faith. Michalson's enthusiasm for this convergence of sacred and secular rationalities is aptly described with words Robert Bellah uses in a quite different context, "We are in a situation where for the first time in centuries theologian and secular intellectual can speak the same language. Their tasks are different, but their conceptual framework is shared. What this can mean for the integration of our fragmented culture is almost beyond calculation."<sup>17</sup>

If this is not the "big idea," the governing concept, which dominated Michalson's theologizing from the mid-fifties until his death in 1965, it certainly constitutes one of his main contributions. And though, as far as I know, he neither called attention to his divergence from Kierkegaard in this respect, nor did he claim to be "improving" on dialectical theology's epistemology, nevertheless it seems clear that by this method he intended to do justice to the decisiveness of revelational history so dear to Kierkegaard and dialectical theology while avoiding the arbitrariness and a-rationality of faith which their approaches seem to imply.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

17. *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 253.

Thus if we were to point to the major advantages of Michalson's method, we might begin by saying, *first*, that it incorporates Kierkegaard's concern to do justice to the authority of revelation, without necessitating that that authority be heteronomous and alien to human reason. When he asserts, "in history there are no authorities,"<sup>18</sup> Michalson is not claiming that the phenomenon of authority is not present and operative where the maieutic is used, but that there is no necessity for an external authority — an authority apart from the process of historical questioning itself — either to guarantee the importance and authenticity of the texts or to require a certain authorized reading or understanding. The understanding which will emerge from the encounter will be self-authenticating; that is, the message will be heard and appropriated precisely at those points where it strikes an authentic note of judgment and grace. Michalson is remarkably Barthian in his confidence that the witness will prove itself. Not that he rejects the Bultmannian effort to "translate" the documents in such a way that the false offenses are removed, but no amount of translation obviates the necessity for the event of understanding, when sentiment coincides with sediment and the word itself speaks.

Note, however, that this moment of coincidence implies that two authorities actually are at work. The first, whose weight is downplayed by the method but which is nonetheless present because it is the presupposition of the whole enterprise, is the biblical materials or kerygmatic witness itself. This authority may be only formal at the initial stage, as Michalson seems eager to emphasize, but it is this authority which is to be authenticated through the process. The other authority is that residing in sentiment; and sentiment is shaped through the values and questions of the culture filtered through the unique existence of the interpreter. Authority is granted this historical consciousness to seek out those traces of meaning which speak to it and thus to engage in selectivity when dealing with the first authority. In the coincidence of the two it is the second authority, therefore, which tends to give the shape to understanding while the first provides the substance (a combination strongly reminiscent of Tillich's analysis of the relationships of religion and culture). This is not to say that culture's values and questions ("paratactic gaps") either should be allowed to, or actually do, dominate the event of understanding; for Michalson is always supremely confident that the biblical word is creative, that it operates as judge and transformer as well as in comfort and grace, and that it can hold its own and retain its integrity in any genuine encounter with honest sentiment. Precisely how it carries out this independence is less clear, as we shall see later.

This discussion of authority has pointed up the fact that Michalson consciously operates in two communities, something which was always true of his theologizing, even during his most

18. *The Hinge of History*, p. 149. See also, *Worldly Theology*, p. 219.

Barthian period. This may have been due to his training as he was drawn to the humanistic concerns of Lynn Harold Hough and H. Richard Niebuhr, on the side, and to the dogmatic and historical concerns of Edwin Lewis and Robert Calhoun, on the other, at Drew and at Yale respectively. There is no question but that this tension was fruitful for Michalson and shaped his dissertation interest in Karl Heim's method of negotiating reason and revelation, standing as Heim did in a church community more than slightly colored by pietism and in an academic community fascinated by new developments in the natural sciences. Implicit within Michalson's approach is the conviction that an authority is more authentic and less heteronomous when it is verified from at least two directions. If the tendency of the church is to draw a circle around itself and operate as a closed community with a single source of authority and a single language, it is the responsibility of the theologian to build bridges to other communities — for the sake of the church itself. What is at stake is not simply the mission of the church but also the fact that what the church claims to be authoritative cannot retain forever its credibility, even for those within the community, if there are no signs that this authority has some plausibility for those outside the community as well.

It is this search for a community of language — prodded by Bonhoeffer's call for a "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts," Bultmann's insistence that the gospel ought to be translatable into contemporary man's own language, and the Troeltsch-Gogarten suggestion that it should be possible to do theology in terms of history alone — which encourages Michalson to tackle the task of translating the supernatural language of the Bible into the language of historical meaning. The task is an ambitious one. If it can be accomplished, however, the kind of dichotomy which Kierkegaard sees between the Socratic-maieutic and the authoritative-revelational approaches will have been overcome, not by an abandonment of history for eternity but by a discovery of the substance of the eternal in historical form.

This, then, is the *second* major advantage which accrues from Michalson's methodology. The realities of the Christian faith are, he asserts, expressible without loss of their authentic substance in terms which are strictly historical and thus secular, in the neutral sense of that term. For Christian faith is not a supernatural — or better, supra-historical — mystery in the traditional sense but an event fully explicable in terms of the functioning of historical reason. The gospel comes with all the force of a "hint,"<sup>19</sup> and the moment of faith occurs when that hint is grasped. It is a moment of illumination, not illumination undergirded by an ontology of mystical participation,<sup>20</sup> but illumination which can secularly, yet quite adequately, be des-

19. *Worldly Theology*, p. 184.

20. Cf. Michalson's criticism of Tillich in this regard, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 66, n. 3.

cribed as “getting the point.” It is an event of meaning in which what previously appeared to be a story about other people in another time and place is suddenly grasped as the elucidation of my own existence and/or that of my society, here and now — indeed, as the clue to the ultimate reality of my situation.

The reality of the Holy Spirit, to take one example which demonstrates the force of the method, can thus be described exhaustively in terms of history and language. Any distinction between human witness and the witness of the Spirit is redundant, because “those who hear the preaching of the church hear Jesus, not because some independent action of the Holy Spirit makes him present, but because the word itself overcomes chronological distance. Those who hear Jesus hear the Father, not because the Holy Spirit intercedes, but because the human word itself has the power in history to substitute for God.”<sup>21</sup> The Holy Spirit, concludes Michalson, is a mythological way of alluding to the presence of God in and through the human word which communicates meaning, a myth which should not be reified in such a way as to become an alternative to Jesus’ own message.<sup>22</sup>

It is difficult to judge at this point how much this reduction of traditional supernaturalistic language to descriptions of historical meaning was for Michalson an exercise conducted in the mood of the time. If the adage is correct that a theological point of view is never challenged and overcome by a position more conservative than itself, but only by one which is in some basic way more radical, Michalson may have been sharpening his tools for the issues posed by the then emerging Death-of-God theology. If so, it is perhaps not fair to evaluate his efforts from a perspective after that theology has made its impact and passed off the center of the stage. No one doubts that his position, had he lived to develop it, would have shown the same dynamism, flexibility and self-criticism, which had characterized his thinking up to that point. Nevertheless I should like to suggest *two* difficulties inherent in his approach which would need to be resolved by anyone wishing to pick up where he left off.

#### IV. *Authority*

The *first* difficulty, it seems to me, is Michalson’s treatment of the problem of *authority*. By making “meaning” the key category he may have resolved the authority problem at the level of value — i.e., that has authority which is of greater value; meaning has value; therefore, it is not difficult to recognize the inherent authority of that which is meaningful. But authority is a more complex problem, not exhausted by the phenomenon of meaning alone.

“Authority,” in any of the several forms it takes, has to do

21. *Worldly Theology*, p. 24.

22. Cf. also *The Rationality of Faith*, pp. 152f.



fundamentally with an ordering process. Whether we are talking about the type of authority exercised by criteria and norms, by expertise, by values, or by power, authority functions to structure the factors involved so as to bring order into a situation previously characterized by confusion and by conflicting values. Thus the nature of authority is that it is a meaning-producing phenomenon in the sense that meaning is itself a structuring of experience so as to make things "hang together" and "make sense." Hence Michalson can claim that there is no authority problem — i.e., the problem of authority is resolved — where history discloses traces of meaning which answer the present need for meaning. The virtue of this solution in his eyes is that it makes authority non-heteronomous and preserves the freedom of man in the encounter with authority; for Michalson is quite aware that authority can be anything but meaning-producing if it is the exercise of arbitrary power to impose an order which does not correspond to the values of those who find themselves subject to the authority. Such an exercise of authority, whether by state or church, is experienced as destructive of meaning, i.e., as doing violence to the order deemed to be *most* meaningful to those being "disciplined." Thus the very word, "authority," has in our culture a negative ring because it has so often been experienced as the imposition of an alien will.

As the pastor/apologist to the sensitive intellectual, Michalson would avoid any approach which smacks of such an imposition. The words with which he describes Kierkegaard as an apologist could be applied to himself: "His efforts to lead men to Christianity were delicate thrusts and parries, nudges and insinuations which provoked men to move, *but always with their concurrence.*"<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this description may fit Michalson better than it does Kierkegaard, whose thrusts were by no means always delicate. And it is just at this point that one of the essential differences between Michalson and Kierkegaard emerges. Kierkegaard rather glories in the offense which the authority of the Incarnation, seen in its blatant historical uniqueness, poses to the reason of his contemporaries. One of the functions of the revelation is to break human reason and its authority. Michalson can resonate to this abrasiveness as long as it touches the rational methodology which appropriately applies to the realm of nature. But what about the historical reason, defined in a Diltheyan sense? Is it subject to suspension? Evidently not, since its authority is so congruent with that of the meaning of faith itself that the "collision between faith and reason within the structure of history is reduced virtually to nothing."<sup>24</sup> Yet does not one of the basic deficiencies of this historical method here come to light? While it is able to deal very well with the continuities between the issues of my life and those of previous eras (Dilthey presupposes an under-

23. Carl Michalson, ed., *The Witness of Kierkegaard*, p. 118, italics added.

24. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 59.

lying *Lebenswelt*, which is the same for all ages), it has trouble doing justice to the discontinuities, to those matters which are of no interest to me. As Michalson himself indicates, this historiographical approach "is absolutely cut off from the materials of the past unless they are addressing questions which the man of the present is asking. The capacity for the past to survive in the present is a direct attribute of the interest the past holds for the present. One does not seek in ancient manuscripts what does not interest him. . . . Nothing can be delivered from the past which does not present itself meaningfully."<sup>25</sup> My sentiment for meaning selects and chooses those traces of meaning in the sediment to which I am attracted. But what authority do the remaining elements have? To what extent am I obligated to come to terms with them? Michalson's ambivalent attitude toward the authority of the Old Testament and the canon are part of this same complex. Can that which is meaningless to me be allowed to call into question my sense of meaning? Can the "not-I" which is found in history claim equal footing with the "I"? Does not an understanding of history include the necessity to come to terms with that which is uninteresting as well as that which is continuous with current needs and interests? And does not the event of faith include as part of the richness of its texture elements of discontinuity, tension and continuing paradox, as well as continuity? Anyone who knows Michalson's writings knows these elements are there, but in the discussion of his historical methodology itself their place and function are not thoroughly enough defined.

### V. *Ontology*

The discussion of the presupposition of authority leads to my *second* point of difficulty, the implicit *ontology* in Michalson's thought, despite his rejection of ontological language and his protestations to be doing theology within the limits of history alone. In his more radical moments Michalson seems to be saying that traditional Christian doctrines can be described exhaustively in terms of the language of historical interpretation which has the power to create existence anew in each generation insofar as it is repeated and the event of language and meaning takes place. Like some of the post-Bultmannians, he seems drawn toward the view that it is not necessary to retain a referent behind the language because the reality is contained in the language itself. (The subjects are collapsed into the predicates.) The "priority of the object" would refer in this case not to an original subject who is the presupposition of the communication which effects meaning but rather to the creative power of language itself, so that the human word not only "has the power in history to substitute for God,"<sup>26</sup> but actually creates the

25. *Worldly Theology*, p. 101.

26. *Worldly Theology*, p. 24.

God-event, which is essentially an event of language. To be sure, such an approach would be truly doing theology in terms of the historical dimension alone, and would parallel the suggestions made by Kenneth Burke in lectures originally delivered at Drew University, which subsequently appeared as *The Rhetoric of Religion*.<sup>27</sup> In those lectures Burke points out how even though language is a human construction, once it has achieved independent status, it functions reflexively like an ontological reality with effects as impressive as any Plato's realm of ideas could hope to achieve.<sup>28</sup> Burke operates as a literary critic, but the phenomenon is of considerable interest and importance to the sociologists of language and of knowledge as well.<sup>29</sup> By a kind of "principle of perfection," words have a way of escalating their coverage until they arrive at the ultimate level from which they reflect back to exercise judgment over existing examples of the species from which they originated. Thus the notion of "king," carried by the rhetoric of religion to its ultimate, reflects back to become the grounds for criticizing the behavior of specific monarchs whose conduct does not measure up to that of the perfect king, eventually questioning even the institution of kingship itself.<sup>30</sup> Such an orientation must have been attractive to Michalson because it avoids the embarrassing problem of the non-verifiability of theological language. Once one has taken the language-is-everything route, all things refer back to language and the question of an external referent is never again appropriate. The phenomenologist from whom he learned much, Merleau-Ponty, and the French structuralists, opened this option to Michalson. And had he employed it consistently he would have been fully justified in his claim to be translating theology into the language of history alone.

Just this comparison of Michalson with a theological option that is radically historical makes clear the fact that Michalson did not do theology in terms of history alone. And his choice of Dilthey is not an accident. To be sure, he did not subscribe to Dilthey's romantic *Lebenswelt* underlying human experience and providing the connections, but Michalson had his functional equivalents by means of which he overcame radical relativity. Though he can speak of "language as performatory," which creates a world which did not hitherto exist, that language actually does not float in the air, nor is it self-grounded in the creativity of language as such, but it refers to events which are adjudged to be rooted in a level which is not afflicted with "historicity," i.e., with the ambiguities of existence. "The word of God is historical language which is not derivable from history in general but rather has the power to create history in the

27. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

29. Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967), especially pp. 34ff.

30. See also Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 14 and 202f.

face of the nothingness of historicity."<sup>31</sup> What gives Michalson the right to claim that the language which describes certain historical events is preserved from historicity, while language describing history in general is not? Certainly not the subsequent course of history, which can hardly be used to verify undeniably the historical superiority of the events of Christian revelation. Nor is the argument convincing that the eschatological nature of this language is what sets it apart in its unique creativity.<sup>32</sup> Eschatological language *per se* has no such curative powers, else it would be universally invoked. Indeed where it is invoked, as in Marxism, it seems to have no built-in guarantee against demonic distortion. No, Michalson's confidence in the language of historical interpretation is only explicable if it contains a cryptic ontology, an assumption that these events are not history in exactly the same sense as other history; but events raised to a higher power, events rooted in a reality deeper than the surrounding historical stream, events whose source thus transcends ordinary history and historicity in such a way as to be equally present to all ages. "All history, insofar as it is inner history, is contemporary history,"<sup>33</sup> which reminds us more of Dilthey's subterranean *Lebenswelt* (or, for that matter, of Tillich's Ground of Being) than of an appropriation of history in its accidental, relativistic character. The sentiment for meaning is a process of obstetric probing which searches out the sediment of the past until it finds those moments which bridge the flux of history because they are somehow the same then as now. They are in that sense transhistorical even though they appear under the guise of history. And one searches until precisely such elements are found rather than those which are radically relativistic, the latter being of course meaningless.

Michalson has other ways of insisting on the purely historical character of his method. For example, a theology is historical insofar as the faith it describes creates historical responsibility rather than religious escape into timelessness, a suggestion which Michalson first found in Gogarten. "Christianity is . . . response to the word of God the content of which is reducible to very simple terms: 'Accept the world from God, make it your responsibility, and do not allow yourself to be enslaved to it again.'"<sup>34</sup> Or, "to be a 'child of God,' is to be set within an historical framework in which one begins to assume his responsibility for a world which God has turned over to him."<sup>35</sup> But what is "God" in these sentences? Obviously he is not a convention of language, a product of history, Burke's perfection of language bending back upon itself. If he were, he would be no more nor less than history calling itself to responsibility for itself; and in Michal-

31. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 143.

32. *Worldly Theology*, pp. 201ff.

33. *The Hinge of History*, p. 29.

34. *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 138.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

son's terms that kind of call would have no power to break through historicity, but would be only a manifestation of it. Clearly, what is involved is a call from that which transcends history and is not reducible to it, for only such a reality would have the *authority* to relativize and order history rather than to be relative to it. And, by this ordering, meaning is produced in what would otherwise be a meaningless situation. But this kind of authority to relativize all things and thus establish the saving order (which is at the heart of Gogarten's Christian "secularization" of the world) is not possible apart from the conviction that "God" has the ontological status of that to which everything else is relative.

One could extend the list of examples but the point would be the same. When Michalson refers to "God" or "faith" or the "eschaton," he is referring to a reality which transcends history in any ordinary usage of this term.

The maieutic method works when applied to historical documents because history speaks to history at the point of their congruity and simultaneity, at the point where distance in time is erased in the moment of recognition. So that Kierkegaard's moment has authority not just because of its uniqueness but because of its universality. What Michalson did develop was an *historical* ontology — one which seeks its continuities in the stuff of history, but an ontology nonetheless. Yet, because the term "ontology" had been so thoroughly pre-empted by another methodology, he felt obliged to wager everything on "history" in the belief that the term could bear the freight with which he intended to load it. There is no question but that the word did communicate and did in fact create history for many a student, listener and reader, who grasped it as the multi-leveled cipher Michalson intended it to be. And they have in fact participated in his vision of faith as a certain kind of historical existence made possible through Christian proclamation. But the presence of the maieutic in Michalson's method may indicate that his oft-made distinction between the ontological and the historical was neither so radical nor so complete as he usually seemed to imply.

# Creation, Hermeneutics and the Life of Faith

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Small boy to father: "I want to marry Grandma."

Father replies: "You can't do that, it's not allowed."

Small boy: "Why not? You married my mother, why can't I marry yours?"

No one who heard Carl Michalson's theology lectures is likely to forget that story or what it was used to illustrate: the hidden but real structure within which the whole of our life is set, the creator-creature structure we cannot escape, the context for every formulation of doctrine. Neglect that structure and life becomes meaningless or absurd. Neglect that context and theological statements, for all their superficial cogency, become nonsense.

Although he almost certainly was unaware of it, the student was already being introduced to certain hermeneutical principles: (1) that the correct conclusion depends upon the right way of putting the question and (2) that every putting of the question implies a pre-understanding which enables the interpreter to make sense of the answer. In the 1950's at least, the preunderstanding Michalson advocated was still couched in largely Barthian terms. The creator-creature structure was asymmetric, defined by the otherness of God and the freedom of God. God is hidden not because our eyes, being human, are too weak or, being sinful, look in the wrong direction. God is hidden *ex-officio* because He is God.

But granted this basic premise that the creator-creature structure is the context within which we must live and therefore interpret our life and do theology, that way of interpreting the structure is itself open to the hermeneutical question. The doctrine of creation can itself be approached in different ways — both the way of putting the question and the set of concepts that makes up the preunderstanding can vary. The invitation to write a programmatic essay in this *Festschrift* has given the opportunity of considering what happens theologically when the theme of creation is approached with different sets of presuppositions. The result offered here is certainly programmatic in the sense that, as much as anything else, it foreshadows work that has yet to be done. I hope it at least shows that such work would be worthwhile, while at the same time providing a

perspective from which to view some of Michalson's ideas and suggesting a project that is in line with his final preoccupation with the worldliness of faith.

### I. INTERRELATED BIBLICAL THEMES

The biblical witness to God as creator is varied and complex. No attempt can be made here to take account of the whole. Instead, three major themes will be identified and outlined so that in Section II it will be possible to contrast the results of approaching these themes from three different theological perspectives.

#### 1. *Creation and Genesis*

No approach to the creation stories in the opening chapters of Genesis that asks the question: "What do they mean?" can afford to short-circuit the prior question: "How did they get there?" That they do not form part of the earliest biblical tradition is now widely recognized; and, while there is still dispute among scholars, the essential features of von Rad's account of how they found their present place in the Hexateuch are now generally accepted.

According to von Rad, the Hexateuch has a simple basic outline which can be seen in the three creedal summaries that form the earliest strands of tradition (Deut. 26:5-9; Deut. 6:20-24; Josh. 24:2-13). These proclaim that God called Abraham and the patriarchs, promised Canaan to Israel enslaved in Egypt, called the people out of bondage and led them through the wilderness to the promised land. These creeds, recited at cultic and family festivals, formed the framework of the Hexateuch which was filled out by existing material from various traditions, some oral, some written, some already in collections, some from other cultures but already shaped by the experience of Israel. And in the process of putting this material together it underwent additional reformulation in order further to reinforce the sacred history.

Significantly, none of these earliest creeds refers to God as creator of heaven and earth. They begin with the act of God in calling Abraham and the patriarchs and go on to His leading the people out of Egypt. They begin that way because that is how Israel's experience of God began. First they experienced Him in their history as a people, then came belief that He must be God of all the peoples. First they knew Him as creator of their nation, then came belief that He must be creator of all the earth. So the primary *creatio ex nihilo* was for them God's making a people out of those who had been no people. Later they came to proclaim Him creator of heaven and earth. Therefore to the accounts of their own history with God they added a prehistory, a prologue which was shaped to harmonize with the knowledge of God that had come through their history and which in turn reinforced that history. The material which they used

came from the cultures of the people around them and which they shared to some extent, but in using that material they transformed it in such a way that it became a projection back to the beginning of what the people of Israel had come to experience in their own history — the creative power of the one God.

While it is not necessary here to trace in any detail *how* the creation stories became part of the biblical tradition,<sup>1</sup> *that* they came from parallel cultures but were in the process transformed has important implications for our discussion. A comparison of the Genesis accounts with Babylonian and Egyptian stories shows the obvious link between them (although almost certainly not a direct derivation) and the equally obvious reinterpretation of the sources that has taken place. Most creation stories in parallel cultures showed man and the world coming into being almost by chance, as a kind of by-product of the loves, jealousies and warring of the gods, sometimes as a tragicomic episode of secondary importance in the never-ending story of some celestial Peyton Place. The biblical accounts, on the other hand, affirm the central and decisive importance of the world and mankind. These are depicted as the result of the solemn, deliberate and orderly exercise of the creative power of the one God.

So a transformation or demythologizing has already taken place, but significantly it takes a different direction from the demythologizing that occurred in other cultures, notably in the Greek. Prior to and indeed alongside the growth of Greek philosophy, the world and man's place in it were accounted for mythologically in relation to the Pantheon. The gods were seen as leading their own lives but also shaping, often capriciously, the lives of men. Socrates initiated the demythologizing, but this was interpreted as inciting atheism among the young and led to his execution. Plato carried on the enterprise by replacing the mythological account of reality with a philosophical one. However, while dispensing with the world-of-gods / world-of-men structure, this philosophical framework remained basically dualistic. The primary dualism was ontological, distinguishing the "world of reality" from the "world of appearance," but there was a secondary epistemological dualism whereby reality is apprehended by knowledge, appearance by opinion.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly the world in which we live (both the realm of nature that is given to man and the world of things that he makes for himself) is less than real. Everything that is here is a copy of a copy of a copy of the fully real, and is therefore necessarily less than perfect and to some extent distorted. Only those who had somehow escaped from the dark cave of

1. For a convincing recent account of Israel's initial reticence about creation to the eventual incorporation of the stories, see B. W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos* (New York: Association Press, 1967), especially Ch. 2.

2. In the *Republic* Plato refines this dualism by dividing the two main worlds further into two more. The framework becomes: higher forms / lower forms / things or objects / images or shadows. The corresponding means of apprehension are then pure reason / understanding / belief or faith / imagination or conjecture.



the world of appearance into the bright light of the world of reality could know the truth and through this knowledge live life genuinely and fully.

The reinterpretation which led to the present form of the creation stories in Genesis took quite a different turn. The Platonic type of dualism was avoided. The world is not, as such, distorted, imperfect, evil or less than real. It is God's good creation, created according to His purpose and therefore good. It is no inferior, relatively unreal world, it is His which God has made and handed over to man to cultivate and subdue, and in which He still comes to man. True, things are not now as they should be, but not because from the beginning or as such the world is imperfect, unreal or distorted. Even the forces of evil, which are certainly taken seriously and whose effects are recognized, are generally seen as somehow dependent upon God for their continued existence. Therefore, man's hope is seen not in terms of escape from this unreal or perverse world, or from the body which binds him to this world, but in terms of the creative power of God who transforms and renews the world and man's life in it.

As Anderson puts it in his *Creation versus Chaos*,<sup>3</sup> the biblical demythologizing is best seen as historicizing. The creation stories as the prologue to the salvation-history of the people are made subservient to the interest in God's acts in history rather than at its beginning. It is that history that gives the creation stories their meaning, and not vice versa. Therefore, whereas in those cultures from which the myths originally came they pointed to the annual cultic renewal of creation, celebrating the eternal cycle of nature within the overall cosmic drama, for Israel the definitive cultic participation was in the drama of Israel's history with God. And the events that formed the core of that history belonged to the present age and not to some "dreamtime" beyond approach or recall. So this move away from emphasizing the cosmic cycle meant that meaning, purpose and direction were now to be found *within* history. This is where God is to be met and known and hope is focused not on a realm above this world but on the creative power of God who comes to the world.

## 2. *Creation and Fall*

Even a preliminary look at the creation stories in Genesis has raised the question of the fall. While the use of the term "fall," reflecting as it does a much later theological interpretation, is anachronistic, the condition of man in the world to which it refers is already part of the Genesis accounts. That condition or human experience is not confined to the biblical witness or to those who take that witness seriously. It reflects the almost universal conviction that

3. Anderson, op. cit., pp. 30-33.

things are not as they could or should be. It points to the widespread sense of alienation, disruption, disappointment and disillusionment that exists. This is frequently compounded by the feeling that while this is not our fault we are still partly responsible, that although we are caught up in circumstances beyond our control yet still we must somehow share the blame, and that most of our efforts to get out of the predicament seem only to make things worse.

Such an interpretation is not dependent upon a religious interpretation of life at all. What then is the biblical dimension in all this? The biblical view is that this alienation is *related* to the doctrine of God as creator but not completely *explained* by it.

To put this another way: man's problematical situation is seen in terms of what he does, and what he does is made possible by God the creator, but there is a link in the chain of cause and effect between what he can do and what he does do that the Bible does not provide. Some other views of the world provide that link, containing within them, either implicitly or explicitly, a complete explanation of man's situation in the world, e.g., that the event of creation itself is a necessary distortion or fall from perfection; or that man's earthly existence represents a trapping of the soul in the body, his best or higher self being restricted by his worse or lower; or that creation is simply an evolutionary process and we are suffering because of having to live at an incomplete stage of the process. But the biblical witness draws no such direct relationship between creation and fall. Man is created in such a way that he can bring this trouble upon himself but not that he has to.

When my two young sons wake us up at daybreak yelling to each other, I ask my wife: "Why do they make such a row?" The answer: "Because they have strong and healthy vocal cords!" But that, aggravatingly, is only part of the answer. I wanted to know not only why they *can* yell so loudly but why they *do*. So with the question: "Why does man sin?" the reply: "Because he is free" is only half the story. It says why he can sin but not why he does. Yet, it is just this question why he does that the Bible leaves unanswered, not because the writers had not yet worked out the answer, but because any such attempt destroys the terms of the question. It is out of his freedom that man disobeys and to ask, "What *causes* that disobedience?" or "What *makes* man disobey?" implies a force working upon or within man that limits the scope of his freedom. Consequently, the responsibility for man's sin is lessened and the profundity of his sin reduced. But there is no room in the biblical witness for a plea of diminished responsibility on those grounds, as Bonhoeffer makes clear in his interpretation of Genesis 1-3. While it may be possible to trace the events leading up to the act of disobedience, these, Bonhoeffer says, should never be seen as *causing* the disobedience and thereby relieving us of responsibility:

In principle it is never wrong to picture to oneself the series of events preceding an evil deed. Everything however depends upon never making the series of events responsible for the deed as such; the series must go no further than the point where the chasm opens, where it becomes really inconceivable how the evil could have been committed. . . . The question of why evil exists is not a theological question. . . . If we could answer it then *we* would not be sinners. We could make something else responsible.<sup>4</sup>

In the account of the fall of Adam in Genesis 3, man's alienation is related specifically to his disobedience. The prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden points clearly to the relationship of responsibility to the creator within which man is to live. At the same time it affirms his freedom (he is capable of eating the fruit although he ought not) and therefore the possibility of disobedience. More than this, man's disobedience is seen as mounting a challenge to the authority of the creator. It begins by challenging the propriety of the prohibition — why should this limitation exist at all? Man has been given authority over the whole of creation. Why should this not amount to complete autonomy without being bound by creaturely limitation? So the decision to disobey becomes a usurping of the authority of God. "Knowing good and evil" therefore refers not so much to the loss of innocence as to gaining knowledge that belongs properly to God alone and thereby to an invasion of God's realm. ("The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." 3:24) The disobedience is therefore more than the transgression of a prohibition, it is an attempt to be like God.

All this underlines the fact that the fall of man (or his basic sin, or his alienation) occurs at the point where man is closest to God. It has as its source the highest aspect of his being, that which he shares with God and indeed makes him capable of becoming like God. Man's predicament is therefore not the fault of some lower nature but is due to the perversity of his best self.

Now this aspect of man that becomes the locus for his fall is often seen as his freedom, but this does not quite fill the bill; nor does the description of the fall as "turning toward the creation rather than the creator" go far enough. The point is that in seeking his autonomy over against God, man turns not just to God's creation but toward his own creativity, his own capacity to create, and elevates this capacity which he shares with God in an attempt to be independent of God. This is seen even more clearly in Genesis 11, the tower of Babel narrative in which the story of the fall is retold on a social scale. Once again man is unwilling to accept the place that God has

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp. 74f, 78.

given him. He wants to make a name for himself (11:4), to win his own place by asserting his own creativity, building a tower with its top in the heavens.

In both these stories of Adam and of Babel there is the same profound irony. God is depicted as stepping in and taking action against man just as he is about to achieve what he is capable of — becoming like God:

The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; what if he now reaches out his hand and takes fruit from the tree of life also and lives forever? So the Lord God drove him out of the Garden of Eden . . . (3:22-24)

Then the Lord came down to see the city and tower which mortal men had built and he said, "Here they are, one people with a single language, and now they have started to do this; henceforward nothing they have a mind to do will be beyond their reach. Come, let us go down there and confuse their speech so that they will not understand what they say to one another." (11:5-7)

This has more than once through the years raised the question whether man can become fully man and achieve his potentiality as a human being so long as he remains subservient to the authority of God. Can he come of age until he has broken clear of this creator-creature structure? Most recently in the radical theologies that developed in the nineteen sixties the answer was a resounding "No!" Only as man affirms the death of God can he become fully and genuinely man.

This is a conclusion that does break free of the irony or the contradiction inherent in the Adam and Babel accounts of the fall. It cannot, however, be reconciled with the biblical view which affirms the irony and retains the tension or paradox.<sup>5</sup> Man, according to the biblical witness, has capacity for incredible achievement, but remains fully man only when this is exercised in obedience to the One who is the source of this capacity. Or, to put it another way, to repudiate the authority of God the creator is not to fulfil the inherent possibilities in life but to bear the image of Adam which leads to death. The very structure (to change the metaphor) that man builds to raise himself to the level of God and to dominate the earth comes in turn to dominate him. The very thing that he sought to avoid is exactly what he brings about — "Let us make a name for ourselves or we

5. This tension was retained by Bonhoeffer (although not by many who claim him as their theological forerunner) who did not say merely that in our coming of age we must live in the world without God. What he did say was that the God who lets us live in the world without the God hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Michalson retained that tension, maintaining that the God who now hands the world over to men is the one whose power is granted to man in the medium of history. (*The Rationality of Faith*, p. 138.)

shall be dispersed over all the earth . . . So the Lord dispersed them from there all over the earth, and they left off building the city."

### 3. *Creation and New Creation*

Michalson's claim that to accept the biblical view is to see creation in terms of history alone and not of nature depends to a certain extent on his highly specialized use of the terms "history" and "nature."<sup>6</sup> But no such proviso applies to his contention that the *origin* of the biblical doctrine of creation lies in history rather than nature. As we have already seen, the order of belief was from God as creator of the people to God as the creator of the world, and in taking over myths from other cultures they were transformed to fit Israel's prior experience of God's saving acts in her history. But important as it is to recognize that the *origin* of the biblical doctrine of creation lies in history, it is even more important to see that history *remained* the main focus of the doctrine, lending more weight to Michalson's contention that the Christian doctrine of creation needs to be transposed out of the categories of nature into those of history if it is to be genuinely biblical.

Even when the people came to belief in God as creator not just of their nation but of the heavens and the earth, of what can be called "the world of nature," history remained the sphere in which they looked for and celebrated the presence of the creator-God. They did not shift their gaze and search for Him in the movements of the stars, the cycle of the seasons or the great cosmic rhythm which was supposed to encompass heaven and earth. Theirs was not an attempt to see God *in* all this, but to praise the One who was beyond it all yet held it in place. Some erred, of course, as the many accounts of the struggles against the Baalim indicate, and the intensity of the struggle and the threat to the genuine faith of Israel accounts for the reluctance in some traditions to stress the doctrine of creation at all.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the faith of the people that emerged from the struggle and which now comprises the biblical witness looked to history as the arena in which the work of the creator-God is to be seen and proclaimed.

Where God's creative power was seen primarily in nature it was possible, in fact mandatory, to recognize His continuing creative and re-creative presence in the daily rising of the sun, the monthly waxing and waning of the moon, the semiannual flooding of the river, the annual cycle of seasons. Did the rejection of all this mean that the biblical writers were restricted in their proclamation of God as creator to what He did at the beginning of things? Clearly not, for the Bible witnesses to God's re-creative work not only at the beginning but within, and also at the end of, history.

6. A use that he acknowledges to be specialized. See especially his response to Langdon Gilkey, one of his "most sympathetic antagonists," in *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 29.

7. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-77.

To take the last first, one implication of flattening out the cycle of nature into the vector of history<sup>8</sup> was that this history which had a beginning also had an end. Just as the doctrine of creation was a projection back to the beginning from present experience of the covenant, so projection forward from that same experience led to a doctrine of culmination. Creation and culmination, beginning and end, are tied firmly together. God's initiating act at the beginning and His act at the end are both described out of the people's experience of Him in their present history. That the re-creative power of God would, in the future, give new life to the nation, so that "on that day" the people would be vindicated, is clear enough from repeated references. More than this, there was some prophetic insight that this re-creative act of God at the end of history would be a renewal of all the peoples of the earth, although this depended on the participation of those in the covenant history of Israel through the new Jerusalem or the reconstituted Temple. Jeremiah, however, looked forward to an act of new creation that was more than the saving activity of God assured under the old covenant. It meant the cutting of a new covenant and therefore the creation of a new relationship between God and His people of the same kind that led to their belief in Him as creator in the first place. That Jeremiah looked forward to this as genuinely new creation is confirmed by the ascription he gives after the prophecy of the new covenant:

These are the words of the Lord who gave sun for a light by day and the moon and stars for a light by night, who cleft the sea and its waves roared; the Lord of Hosts is his name. (31:35)

There is also in this verse, and just as clearly, a link between what God did at the beginning of all history and what He did at the beginning of Israel's history. There is an echo of the Priestly creation story in the reference to sun, moon and stars, and to the separation of the waters; but in the cleaving of the sea there is also an unmistakable reference to the Exodus path through the Red Sea. This is only one of a number of places in the Old Testament where the waters of chaos and of the Red Sea are imaginatively linked,<sup>9</sup> pointing to the fact that for the biblical writers the work of God the creator is confined neither to the end nor to the beginning of history, but is affirmed also in the past, present and continuing experience of the people.

In this proclamation and celebration of the recurring presence of the creator-God there was the ever present danger of following the nature-cults in their belief that God was bound to act in accordance

8. I found this phrase in some notes for a lecture that I gave a year or so ago. I do not recognize it as my phrase, but cannot trace its source.

9. See also, e.g., Isaiah 51:9-11.

with the cosmic rhythm, or that His beneficence was guaranteed, or could be guaranteed by appropriate cultic rites. This, however, the biblical writers avoided by asserting again and again the Lordship of Yahweh *over* the whole created order and *over* His covenant people. When rites were taken over from other cultures, these, no less than the creation stories, were demythologized, so that what in other cultures were nature festivals or fertility rites became, in Israel, commemorations of events in history. So, for instance, the Passover which had been a festival of Spring became Israel's celebration of deliverance from Egypt. These celebrations became a means by which people recognized, by analogy with the great events of the past, God's activity in the present.

In the New Testament, God's act of new creation is related directly to Jesus Christ, but, as in the Old Testament, this re-creative work of God is seen in the present as well as recognized in the past and projected to the end.

In Christ, it is affirmed, God's new creation is already present. The prologue to the Fourth Gospel sets the incarnation of the Word in the context of the creative Word spoken by God at the beginning. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the same creative Word that called light out of darkness and now witnesses to the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus." Sounding the same note in many different places, Paul affirms that those in Christ are a new creation; that whereas Adam brought death, Christ brings life and restores us to the place intended by the creator; that the same powers of chaos and darkness that were put to flight at creation are now put in their place by Christ; that to Christ is given primacy over the whole created order. The Synoptic Gospels, too, point to Christ who exercises the power of God Himself, creating anew by raising the dead to life, but putting to flight the demons that make life chaotic, bringing order out of the waters of chaos and sustaining His people in the wilderness. (So Mark links together the feeding of the people and the stilling of the storm: if the disciples had understood the significance of the loaves they would not have been astounded that Jesus stilled the storm. Mk. 6:52.)

And yet the consummation is still in the future. The Lamb who sits upon the throne is making all things new, but this is not yet fulfilled. The culmination of God's creative act which will occur at the end to match His act of creation at the beginning has not yet occurred. The event for which the whole of creation is yearning is still in the future (Romans 8:21,22).

It is at this point that the nature-history question emerges once again, for Paul says that it is not just man but the whole of creation that looks for its release and renewal. Does this not include the realm of "nature" as well as "history?" There is a persistent theme in the Bible that the creator-God will redeem and renew not only man in his history but the whole of the world of nature, and this is found in both Old (the desert shall blossom as the rose, the wolf shall lie down

with the lamb) and New (the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay) Testament.

What are we to make of this? It is not difficult to see that this was consistent with the biblical writers' belief in God as creator and with the way that belief arose. While God's present activity was recognized more in their history than in the cycle of nature, when this experience was projected back to the beginning it included the affirmation of God as creator of all that is. It therefore completed the pattern to see Him re-creating all that is, nature as well as history, at the end. It is, however, much more difficult to say what this means to us, for that depends to a large extent on how it is approached, with what questions and presuppositions. Theologians, for instance, who agree on the importance of this theme of restoration of the whole created order are far apart on their conclusions about what it means. To take one example, Barth suggests that the emphasis should be, not on man plus the rest of the created order waiting for re-creation, but on both those who do know the first-fruits of the spirit and those who do not waiting together for the redemption of all mankind. On the other hand, Brunner reads this in the context of his view of the "orders of creation," e.g., that the family and state which are now distorted because of man's sin will be restored at the end-time. Bultmann maintains that it is man's relationship to the creation and not the creation itself that is disrupted because man has put himself under the domination of the world. It is therefore the restoration of this relationship to the world which is sought. These variations reflect more than a disagreement over translation, context or "insight into the Hebrew mind." They point to differences in the preunderstandings with which the text is approached.

## II. PATTERNS OF INTERPRETATION

We have just had a glimpse of how a difference in preunderstanding affects conclusions about one segment of the biblical witness to new creation. This will now be illustrated in relation to the three interrelated themes of creation, fall and new creation already introduced. Three different approaches will be identified and the different conclusions on the three themes noted. Each of the approaches has been given a label, and in each case one theologian has been cited as typifying that approach, together with a suggestion of how Michalson's views compare. No theologian, of course, would allow himself to be fitted precisely into the mold thus prepared for him, and each approach is too strictly defined to persuade people to follow any one approach alone, so that the limitations noted by H. Richard Niebuhr to this approach in his *Christ and Culture* certainly apply here, viz., that any grouping of outlooks or approaches into different types is always partly artificial because a type is always to some extent a construct. No person or group ever conforms com-



pletely to a type.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as he goes on to say, despite inadequacies it does have the advantage of clarifying the issues and drawing attention to great recurring motifs.

### 1. *The Transcendentalist Approach*

This is the approach which has as its starting point the radical “otherness” of God, an approach most easily identified with Karl Barth although, as he himself points out,<sup>11</sup> more accurately with the Barth of the 1920’s. It would be hard to find a better way of describing this kind of approach than to quote some of Barth’s own comments in retrospect:

The stone wall we first ran up against was that the theme of the Bible is the deity of God, more exactly God’s deity — God’s independence and particular character, not only in relation to the natural but also the spiritual cosmos, God’s absolutely unique existence, might and initiative, above all, in His relation to man. Only in this manner were we able to understand the voice of the Old and New Testaments. Only with this perspective did we feel we could henceforth be theologians, and in particular, preachers — ministers of the divine Word.<sup>12</sup>

What happens then when this perspective is brought to bear on the three themes?

#### (a) *Creation*

To affirm God as creator is, in the first instance, to emphasize this creator-creature structure, God’s “absolutely unique existence . . . in His relation to man.” It is another way of asserting God’s absolute authority over the whole of creation, of underlining “the famous ‘wholly other’ breaking in upon us ‘perpendicularly from above,’ the not less famous ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between God and man.”<sup>13</sup> To say that God is creator is to stress that God is distinct from man and the world, from all that He has created.

The influence of this stance was reflected in Michalson’s lectures in the 1950’s in which he linked the doctrine of creation to the ideas of God’s hiddenness, freedom and holiness. The hiddenness of God was seen as an attribute of God, not the result of our finitude or infirmity. He is hidden because He is God and this keeps us from looking for Him in the wrong places and thus falling into idolatry. To

10. H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1951), p. 43.

11. K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 38.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

say that God is creator is another way of asserting His hiddenness, that the creator-creature structure within which all of us must live is asymmetric. God is other than man and cannot be approached or understood by building out from the side of man. God is free so that He escapes any human attempt to restrict Him to our way of seeing or doing or expecting. And the holiness of God is to be understood within the same set of theological co-ordinates that mark the creator-creature gulf, so that it is nonsense to posit some pattern of moral conduct, to see that God fits into this perfectly, and so to conclude that "God is holy." It was the holiness of God as Rudolf Otto saw it to which Michalson pointed with approval — the holiness of God which conveys the overwhelming sense of His otherness, the tremendous power of God to which we can respond only in awe, which both fascinates and repels us so that we are in a way content that God should remain hidden.

A further implication of this hiddenness of God is that we cannot know Him, even that He is our creator, until He chooses to reveal Himself. This He has not done in nature, at least not in a way that can be discerned by man, but only in history, and, specifically, in the event of Jesus Christ. Only by beginning there can we come to faith in God as creator. So Barth maintained that it was the second article of the Creed and not the first that provides the key to the doctrine of the creation. Only through Christ do we know God as creator of heaven and earth, man as his creature and the purpose of creation.<sup>14</sup>

(b) *The Fall*

This, predictably, is seen as man's attempt to disregard the creator-creature relationship, or, more directly, to rebel against the place set for him in this structure. In one of his expositions of Genesis 3 Barth maintained that the creature "neither could nor should be God,"<sup>15</sup> but this is just the fundamental sin of man, to try on his own account to judge between good and evil, to try to master the threatening forces of nothingness on his own account and not by the power of God. Man misuses his freedom by trying to usurp the authority of the creator, but in fact this is an illusory freedom — he cannot stand on his own and exercise the creative power of God, so that the attempt ends in disastrous defeat. However, the knowledge of his defeat and its effects upon him come to man only in his relationship to Christ. Only by contrasting his own life to the humility, obedience and self-humiliation of the Son of God does man recognize the dimensions of his own sin: his pride in wanting to exalt himself to the level of God, his sloth which lets him sink into the mire of anxiety and inhumanity, his falsehood which rejects the truth of grace.

14. Also John Henry Newman who said that when he looked at creation in order to see the face of the creator it was like looking into his mirror but not seeing his own reflection.

15. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III 3, p. 355.



For Michalson, too, resolute rejection of God was the central motif in the doctrine of the fall, yet the reason for this rejection could not be given in causal terms. Agreeing with both Barth and Bonhoeffer, Michalson maintained that sin is, at its core, irrational. As a responsible act, it is rooted in freedom, but when man in his freedom tries to break out of his creaturely relationship, that freedom disintegrates. Freedom is found only within that relationship, not in attempting to escape it. Freedom which does not reckon with the freedom which transcends its own, the freedom of the creator God, is a freedom in vain.<sup>16</sup>

(c) *New Creation*

Since in this approach the theme of creation applies mainly in the area of history and of the God-man relationship, so does the theme of new creation which is seen largely as the fulfilment of God's purpose for man which He had from the beginning. And just as the second article of the Creed — Jesus Christ — provided the clue to the first — creation — so also it provides the clue for new creation.

Man as creature finds his true fulfilment not in a necessary development of his created nature but through grace, the gift of the creator-God. Man has turned his back on this gift, thus disrupting his relation to God, cutting the ground from under his own feet and losing his whole *raison d'être*.<sup>17</sup> But, in His gracious act in Jesus Christ, the same creator-God fulfils His covenant purpose for all mankind. In Jesus Christ, the God-man, God and man are already reconciled. This way of approaching the biblical material, if carried through consistently, has two implications. The first is that since the eternal purpose of God in creation is seen to be the fulfilment of this covenant of grace, reconciliation in Christ and new creation merge into one. Second, when it is also asserted that in Christ this reconciliation has already occurred, then in the most important sense new creation is already accomplished.

This certainly does justice to what we have already seen as the biblical writers' overriding concern to read the doctrine of creation in terms of history and the covenant, and therefore of the redemption of mankind rather than the restoration of nature. Nevertheless, there seems to be something missing when so much emphasis is placed on the past event of Christ in which reconciliation was achieved and new creation already accomplished. For even when it is added that man still needs to appropriate this in the present and that the final fulfilment is yet to come, this can too easily become a matter of course, a necessary but predictable outworking of what has been given and is,

16. From notes on a lecture in Michalson's 1956 course on Systematic Theology. See also his discussion of man's freedom as nothing unless set within the structure of God's freedom in his article: "The Real Presence of the Living God," *Faith and Ethics*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), pp. 263-4.

17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV 1, p. 10.

in a way, over and done with. This definitive stress on man and history to the virtual exclusion of the rest of the created order is inclined to allow for only a narrow interpretation of the future fulfilment for which the whole of creation yearns. Anything but the expectation of man's redemption is left to an area of "not-knowing."<sup>18</sup> This by-passes an area of biblical witness and leaves one who follows this approach with little to say to one of the major issues of our time — the increasing threat to our environment, the "world of nature" in which our life is sustained. To recognize God as creator only by beginning with the new creation in Jesus Christ may put man in a new light but tends to leave the rest of the created order in the shadows. Attention is focused on man's being created anew in the world but not necessarily on the re-creation of the world.

## 2. *The Immanentist Approach*

Characteristic of this approach in contrast to the last is the stress on continuity rather than discontinuity, on relation rather than distinction. Here the key concept is correlation, the correlation of word and situation, of the eternal with the changing, of religion and culture, theology and philosophy, essence and existence, divine and human, God and man. It is a method of approach that is exemplified by Paul Tillich.

### (a) *Creation*

To affirm God as creator within this context is, as with the previous approach, to point to the creator-creature relationship. The doctrine of creation is not, says Tillich "the story of an event which took place once upon a time. It is the basic description of the relation between God and the world."<sup>19</sup> But while history is seen as the realm in which the doctrine is most meaningful, the emphasis on specific and decisive events in history as acts of the creator-God is missing. The creation stories are seen as symbols of what God is always doing in every aspect of history, and the doctrine of God as creator calling all that is into being and acting decisively to create anew is translated into the doctrine of God's creativity in which He is seen as "creative in every moment of temporal existence, giving the power of being to everything that has being out of the creative ground of the divine life."<sup>20</sup> Therefore the creator-creature structure here, far from pointing to the distance or to the distinction between divine and human, is made to reinforce the continuity between God and man; and the "image of God" in man is therefore seen in terms of being, not just of responsible relation. "Man is the image of God because the logos is analogous to the divine logos, so that the divine

18. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 310.

19. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 252.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

logos can appear as man without destroying the humanity of man."<sup>21</sup>

To affirm God as creator is also to point to the harmonious structure within the being of man himself, his essential orderliness, the balance between what Tillich calls the ontological elements that define his essential being, poised as he is in tension between individuality and participation, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny.

### *(b) The Fall*

This description of man drawing his being from the being of God, his own life and his relation to the world ordered and in balance is, however, a description of ideal or essential man, not man as he is. Man's actual life, or life under the conditions of existence as Tillich puts it, is quite different from this. Although the features of his essential being are still discernible, they are marred and distorted. In the anxiety that occurs when he is faced with the threat of losing his being in nothingness, he tries to establish himself by asserting first one side of his being and then the other. The balance is broken and he is torn apart, vacillating between loneliness and collectivism, self-assertion and will-lessness, license and fatalism.

This is a convincing description of man as he is. But how did he get there? Why is his life like that? Following this approach it is difficult to avoid concluding that it is an inevitable consequence of moving from ideal to real, from essential to actual. The creation itself appears as a fall into existence. This is far closer to the Platonic conclusions mentioned before than to the biblical account which, it was contended, largely avoided that view, insisting that creation was not as such a distortion or fall but good, as God intended. Although Tillich sets his own view over against the Platonic and neo-Platonic views which made the divine being dependent upon, rather than the source of, the eternal essences or ideas, he does maintain that the doctrines of creation and fall coalesce at the point of man's creatureliness. "Fully developed creatureliness is fallen creatureliness,"<sup>22</sup> not just in fact (which would be consistent with the biblical view of the all-pervasiveness of sin), but necessarily and in principle because, according to Tillich, the creature, in order to actualize his essence in existence, must step outside the creative ground of the divine life.

On this point, Michalson links Tillich with such nineteenth century idealists as Schelling, and rejects their position on the ground that, while it takes the doctrine of original sin seriously in that it recognizes the universality of the fall, it locates the origin of sin in the wrong place. It is not true to say that it is the fall which initiates history and makes it possible; creation and not the fall is the beginning of history. "The fall cannot explain history because history is needed to explain the fall."<sup>23</sup>

21. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

23. Carl Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith* (New York: Scribners, 1963), p. 119.



(c) *New Creation*

The biblical message of new creation, as we have already seen, focuses on the meaning of this new creation for man in his history, links the creative act of God at the beginning with the consummating event expected at the end, and points to the decisive place of Jesus Christ. The approach we have called the "immanentist" takes account of all these features but applies a characteristic interpretation.

For man in history new creation means the restoration of his creaturely being, reuniting him with the divine ground of his being and thereby overcoming the disruption within his own existence. The experience of new being comes as love reunites the disparate elements of his life. At the same time the dimension of future fulfillment is also maintained. This new being is experienced by man only fragmentarily and largely by anticipation, and he also looks forward to "the end of history and the final conquest of the ambiguities of life."<sup>24</sup> In keeping with the view of the essence-to-existence move as fall, this is seen as the reversal of that process — existence to essence. But more, in line with the God-man divine-human continuity, it is also seen as a final taking up of the human into the divine. So not only is the essential balance restored between individuality-participation, dynamics-form, freedom-destiny, but it is also transformed into the dimension of Eternal Life in which God is everything in and to everything.<sup>25</sup>

As with the transcendentalist approach, in this way of seeing things Jesus Christ is the new creation, the one in whom God and man come together. But whereas in the Barthian scheme Christ is the absolutely unique one, the paradox, the impossibility become possible, for Tillich Jesus as the Christ embodies what is every man's potential, although in fact only in Christ does essential godmanhood appear under the conditions of existence "without disruption and without distortion." In him new being is already manifest and made available to those who participate courageously, anticipating the fulfillment at the end of history.

### 3. *The Existentialist Approach*

As Michalson observed in a memorable lecture, this label is very imprecise and has been used to describe everything from styles in hats to serious technical philosophies.<sup>26</sup> Here the term is used for approaches that share three main features. *First*, only those statements of doctrine are meaningful that say something about man's existence, i.e., that at the same time as they refer to God they must

24. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, pp. 427ff.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

26. Carl Michalson, ed., *Christianity and the Existentialists* (New York: Scribners, 1956), p. 2.

also address themselves to man's self-understanding. Wherever this dimension is not apparent in biblical or theological affirmations, translation must be done so that it does appear. *Second*, my existence in the present must be addressed. It is not enough that the reference to man's existence be given in general terms. The doctrine must say something about how I am to understand myself, to act, decide, and respond in my own situation in the present. To use another Michalson example, the statement "Man is mortal" has existential significance only when it becomes "One day I must die" or, more precisely, "I may die today." *Third*, the self is seen primarily in historical terms and is defined not by some prior essence that outworks during life, but as an existence that is constituted in historical decisions. In this approach, therefore, the historicity of the self becomes the primary category of history. Nature and history (thought of in terms of the past history of men and of nations) are historically insignificant until they impinge on a man's existence in the present and thereby become constitutive of his history.

Rudolf Bultmann will be taken as the typical exponent of this approach, an approach which clearly influenced Michalson as is evident from his work, especially *The Rationality of Faith*.

#### (a) *Creation*

The way that such an approach to the biblical witness shapes the understanding of God as creator is immediately evident in Bultmann's writing. For example:

Only such statements about God are legitimate as express the existential relation between God and man. Statements which speak of God's actions as cosmic events are illegitimate. The affirmation that God is creator cannot be a theoretical statement about God as *creator mundi* in a general sense. The affirmation can only be a personal confession that I understand myself to be a creature which owes its existence to God.<sup>27</sup>

The doctrine of creation, therefore, refers to the historicity of man rather than to the origin of the cosmos. It is not a theory about the past but an affirmation about the present, and what is affirmed echoes the transcendentalist conclusion about the creator-creature structure — to have faith in God as creator is to acknowledge "the nothingness of the world and ourselves."<sup>28</sup> This is the main force of the *creatio ex nihilo*, not a theory about the beginning of the world but a recognition of the nothingness of our lives apart from the presence of the creator-God.

27. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribners, 1958), p. 69.

28. Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 177.



Michalson's approach in *The Rationality of Faith* runs precisely parallel to this. After showing that the doctrine is usually interpreted in terms of nature, he charts a different course. In Christianity, the meaning of creation ought to be expressed,

in a fundamentally different way. . . . In Christianity the doctrine has to do not with cosmology but with history, not with the temporal origin nor with the technical explanation of the universe but with the meaning of man's life.<sup>29</sup>

And what is the meaning of life conveyed by the doctrine of creation? That without God man is nothing; that without God's creative act he has no world, no history; that because God is the creator, man receives all that he is and has from Him. Here Michalson enlists the Reformers in the cause: "As John Calvin very early made plain, 'To say God is the creator means we receive everything from his hands.'"<sup>30</sup>

(b) *The Fall*

As in the transcendentalist approach, the fall of man is seen as his attempt to disregard the creator-creature structure, to try to transcend his creaturely limits by acts of self-assertion. In the anxiety that arises when he recognizes his own limitations, especially the ultimate limitation of his death, man turns to the world, trying to find in creation instead of in the creator alone a source of security. This, Bultmann maintains, is the fundamental rebellion against God, a living not only in flesh (a characteristic of every man's existence as man) but also according to the flesh (a characteristic of fallen existence).<sup>31</sup> In so doing he loses his true life by becoming captive to the very forces in which he sought his security. The additional dimension to his predicament (traditionally his "total depravity") is that man is not able, despite his own best efforts, to break loose from the powers into whose hands he has given himself, or to break free of the past and be open to the future because his past is himself, what he has made of himself through his past decisions. To be free of this is to be a new man, a new creation, which is not a simple possibility for man but is precisely what God in Jesus Christ offers to man.

As a result of his self-assertion, man is a totally fallen being. He is capable of knowing that his authentic life consists in self-commitment, but he is incapable of

29. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 43.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

31. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (New York: Scribners, 1951), p. 239.



realizing it because however hard he tries he still remains what he is, self-assertive man. So in practice authentic life becomes possible only when man is delivered from himself. It is the claim of the New Testament that this is exactly what has happened.<sup>32</sup>

Michalson's approach runs parallel here as well. The fall is to be seen in historical terms, not, as Tillich maintained, as a fall into existence and therefore the beginning of freedom and the possibility of history, but the other way around.<sup>33</sup> The fall is man's rebellion against the command of God that meets him in history, the command which at the same time gives man his freedom and calls on him to use it responsibly, yet which freedom man uses self-assertively against God.<sup>34</sup> Michalson, however, adds a dimension of irony and tragedy which is largely missing in Bultmann. He points to the "something in history which tempts man with hopes which history does not allow him to fulfil" and refers to the dizzy prospect which our freedom shows us. And somehow in this dizziness of possibility, at the intersection of what we may do through our freedom and what we should do in responsible relation to God, we fall. "The fall away from God is not a willful desire to act on one's own initiative but the sheer drunkenness of anxiety over one's sense of history, of freedom, of possibility."<sup>35</sup>

Here is only a suggestion, a sketch made more than once<sup>36</sup> but never filled in, reflecting in a way I have seen nowhere else the irony referred to earlier in the biblical accounts, that man falls just as he seems to be reaching the dizzy heights made possible by God's gift of freedom, just as the top of the tower looks like reaching the heavens, just as he is on the brink of becoming like God Himself.

### (c) *New Creation*

What happens when the biblical theme of new creation is approached with the existentialist principles of interpreting in terms of history rather than nature, of "my historicity" rather than the history of man and nations, of the present rather than the past?

Bultmann, despite what his many detractors say, holds firmly to the New Testament proclamation of Christ as the focus of new creation. Characteristically, however, he turns attention away from the past-historical dimension, insisting that it is only in the present and for me that Christ becomes the saving event through whom I am created anew. The past occurrence of Jesus of Nazareth becomes the

32. Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol. 1 (London: S P C K, 1954), p. 31.

33. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 119.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. In at least three courses I took with him he returned to the same theme.

salvation event in the present, and then not through any merely "reminiscent historical account referring to what happened in the past,"<sup>37</sup> but only through proclamation that challenges me to understand myself in terms of that event and to act accordingly.

This approach clearly meets one strand of the biblical witness to new creation — that this occurs here and now in the life of the man of faith who is "in Christ." But what of the other strands, of expectation for the future, and for the whole world and not just individual men? The existentialist approach takes account of these, but not as separate themes. They are interpreted as different aspects of, or as different ways of speaking symbolically about, the event already referred to — the salvation-occurrence that comes in personal history in the present. This way of dealing with the biblical material is seen in Bultmann's consistent use of the term "eschatological event" for the saving act of God which occurs in present experience of the one who is in Christ. As the following quotations show, the expectation both for the future and for the world are reduced to the present experience in a believer's own history:

According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the eschatological event, which means that he is the action of God by which he has set an end to the old world. In the preaching of the Christian church the eschatological event will ever again become present and becomes present ever again in faith. The old world has reached its end for the believer. He is a new creation in Christ. For the old world has reached its end for him insofar as he himself as the old man has reached his end and is now a new man, a free man.<sup>38</sup>

Thus eschatological existence has become possible. God has acted, and the world — "this world" — has come to an end. Man himself has been made new.<sup>39</sup>

In this approach, therefore, there has been retained a relation between beginning and end, creation and new creation, but, whereas the biblical writers projected back to the beginning and on to the end their present experience of God, Bultmann uses past and future and projects them as dimensions of the present. Following Heidegger, past becomes the category of inauthenticity while the future is the category of freedom and authenticity. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not in the future at all in the sense of something that has yet to come in the course of time. To say that it is future makes sense when translated existentially to refer to the possibility of new self-understanding which God constantly grants to man.

37. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 302.

38. Bultmann, *Listener*, September 1955, p. 330.

39. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol. 1, p. 32.



For those familiar with Michalson's use of existentialist motifs it comes as a surprise to see him dismiss existentialism along with Marxism because of its defective eschatology. "Christianity," he says, "is fundamentally at odds with the seductive eschatology of both Marxism and existentialism for the same reason that it is at odds with apocalypticism."<sup>40</sup> But it becomes clear that what he is referring to as existentialism is something different from the approach I have been describing, for he goes on: "Existentialism defines the future as a mood of expectation within the present toward a future which one can only await. As such . . . it sacrifices the present to the future."<sup>41</sup> But the existentialist approach typified by Bultmann is open to precisely the contrary criticism — that it sacrifices the future to the present.

So what Michalson then describes as Christian eschatology is very much in line with the Bultmann type of approach. "Christian eschatology, on the other hand, is concerned with a future which confers fulfillment upon the present. *Now* is the time of maturity for the Christian. Now are the Christians filled with the eschatological beatitudes and attributes of spirit. Now the Kingdom of God has begun. One who loses his life in it will find his life not later but *now*."<sup>42</sup> This, of course, accords with the New Testament proclamation of new creation already present in Jesus Christ, but, as with Bultmann, the other strands in the biblical witness to new creation as future and for the whole world are made subservient to this emphasis on the "now," and the future reference is demythologized so that it becomes an attribute of the present:

One might ask why it is any longer legitimate to refer to this end of history as a future at all. . . . It would be better not to talk of the Christian future at all than to talk of it as not yet come. The New Testament seems to support the possibility when it refers to Christ as the end who is also the beginning. The importance of identifying this beginning as a future, however, is to separate it from a past which is gone and from a present which fades away under the erosion of transience. Christ is an event primarily future because he is the end of transience and the beginning of a permanent presence.<sup>43</sup>

### III. SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

When the existentialist approach is followed, the themes of creation, fall and new creation all come to focus in the present life of the individual. To affirm God as creator is not to refer back to His

40. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 141.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

past act at the level of nature or world-history, but to the fact that I now receive the world from Him. The fall is not an incident in the past whose effects I have inherited and still suffer; it is my constant disposition to fall from the dizzy heights of possibility into rejection of the command and grace of God. New creation is not a future event in the history of the world in which the order of creation will be restored, but the promise of a new life here and now, a life which, in response to Christ, has new direction and power.

This way of understanding the biblical themes has distinct advantages. It does not exclude from belief, and therefore from hope, those who see beyond the literal truth of the biblical imagery, but neither does it simply reject that imagery. It provides a way of interpreting this which makes sense to "modern man," and is particularly effective in elucidating those New Testament passages where expectation is seen as already fulfilled in the coming and presence of Jesus Christ. And by focusing on personal history rather than world history, hope remains for the individual even when world events give little reason for hope at all.

However, despite my own attachment to this theological approach, influenced as I have been by Michalson and Bultmann, it is difficult to avoid the force of Moltmann's criticism at this point. Moltmann<sup>44</sup> insists that this individualizing of Christian hope, this focusing on personal history in the present in such a way that world-history and the future become modes of my present self-understanding is both a one-sided interpretation of biblical witness and an affront to modern man. It is one-sided because it overlooks the dimension of promise in the covenant relation between creator and creature. Such promise is more than fulfilment of what is already present; it points in the direction of something radically new and unexpected in God's dealing with man. The future action of God, which has not yet occurred and which will include the renewing of the earth as well as of man's history, gives grounds for hope for the world as well as for redeemed man's existence in the world. It is an affront to modern man because no human being worth his salt can be content with hope for his own personal history while not holding out hope for the world, for nations and societies, for the future of mankind.

Bultmann and Michalson would object, of course, that their approach in no way leads to detachment from the world. On the contrary, Michalson insisted that the logic of his position, of a theology grounded in history rather than nature, leads to the conclusion that in Christ God has turned the world over to man.<sup>45</sup> Far from escaping from the world or basing hope on what happens in my history despite what happens in the world, Michalson maintained that the maturity of faith gives man "a hope which puts the whole

44. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

45. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, p. 138.

responsibility for the world on man; a hope which does not leave man without divine aid, but grants him the power of God in the medium of history, which is the medium in which man becomes free, intelligent and responsible."<sup>46</sup>

However, a fundamental difference in approach remains. For Moltmann, the hope that man can cope with the world that has been turned over to him is illusory unless the power that God grants is seen as something more than a continuation of what is now known and experienced. Only that promise of God's action in the future that stands somehow in contradiction to the reality now experienced can provide the hope that sustains men and initiates purposeful action.<sup>47</sup>

This concluding comment does not do justice to the scope of Moltmann's work; it really points to the fact that at least a fourth needs to be added to the typical approaches considered in Section II of this essay. Neither does it do justice to those parts of Michalson's final and fragmentary writings in which he began to explore further the meaning of hope in the context of a world handed over to man. But it has brought us to the point of relating the themes of creation, fall and new creation to the question of how man is to live in the world, and this is another aspect of the hermeneutical task that this essay leaves undone.

In what has gone before I have tried to show what happens when the interrelated biblical themes are approached with different sets of presuppositions. But conclusions vary not just with varying preunderstandings but also with different ways of putting the question. What happens, therefore, when these themes are approached with the question What does belief in God as creator say to how we are to live in the world? Christians have responded in different ways. Some, stressing the fallenness of the world, have chosen to live as aliens. Others, seeing the continuity between God and his creation, have lived as collaborators. Others, emphasizing the reality but partiality of the new creation, have lived as innovators. Yet others, whose hope in Christ can no longer put up with things as they are, act to precipitate the new creation and live as revolutionaries. It will be an important task to investigate further this link between ways of understanding the doctrine of creation and conclusions about how to live in the world, but in this programmatic essay I can do no more than propose it as worth doing and look forward with hope to its fulfilment.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 18.

# Toward A Contemporary Understanding of the Holy Spirit

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Carl Michalson spent his theological lifetime concentrating on the development of a proper hermeneutic for theology in our day. He was correct in sensing that the basic crisis was not a particular doctrine but the interpretive process itself. For him as for Rudolf Bultmann the driving force behind that quest for an adequate hermeneutic was the search for a contemporary theological formulation sufficient to proclaim God's acting in history.

From a historical analysis of his theological journey three distinct but intertwining chronological periods emerge which represent stages along life's way for Carl Michalson. Not only was Michalson a Methodist, but his earliest roots were in the Holiness movement. To deal with the question of God's acting in history, therefore, was to deal with the question of the Holy Spirit. Even though for him there was no one definitive understanding of the Holy Spirit (it varied from period to period), central to each of the theologies of Carl Michalson is the reality of the Holy Spirit.

1. The first stage, *neo-orthodox*, covered the span to 1953. His understanding dealt with four basic issues. (a) Transcendence and immanence: Holy Spirit as source of life. Though Holy Spirit by nature is transcendent, Michalson understood the Spirit to be the inward source of life, for church and for individual. As such, Holy Spirit is *the* existentials of man's life. (b) Word and sacrament: Holy Spirit as source of power. Maintaining a balance between Word and Spirit, Michalson points to word and sacrament as the locus of power and the occasion for Spirit. (c) The Church visible and invisible: Holy Spirit as source of community. Within the Holy Spirit's being understood as relation, the Church is interpreted as function. The church is grounded in Holy Spirit as communal reality. (d) Continuity: the Holy Spirit as the midpoint of remembrance and expectation. Based in the *filioque* doctrine, continuity is a transhistorical, continuous unity between Christ and the Holy Spirit. Surrounded by the eschatological presence of Holy Spirit, one expectantly waits for the Kingdom.

2. The second stage, *existential*, covered 1953 to 1960. Through existential interpretation, Michalson sought from within history to



understand the Christian faith. History is composed of "dimensions," interpreted through a structure of correlation. The locus of dimensional convergence is the self-consciousness. The four dimensions of history are (1) world history, (2) existential history, (3) biblical history, and (4) eschatological history. In eschatological history the presence of the hidden God is encountered. Jesus Christ, source and possibility of meaningful history, becomes the person's constitutive element. Holy Spirit is the contemporaneity of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the presence of the Holy Spirit who inaugurates eschatological history in the event of preaching. That God makes his Word known through human words is a paradigm of the power of the Spirit.

3. The third stage, embracing both *phenomenology* and the "new hermeneutic," covered from 1960 until his death in 1965. Central was Michalson's continuing drive to reformulate the faith thoroughly in radically historical terms. Concern is for meaning; that is found in history alone. Theology must speak within the limits of history. Eschatological history is where the reality of history and the reality of faith coalesce. Eschatological history is meaningfulness through the liberating power of the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is the specifically Christian meaning of history-in-general's understanding of freedom. This comes in speech, happening in a specifically human "world," a *Lebenswelt*. When one's being-in-the-world is being-in-eschatological-*Lebenswelt*, then one is in-the-Holy-Spirit. Because this horizon is a corporate one, Holy Spirit is not a separate trans-historical or supernatural reality but the very source and characterization of the horizon itself. Employing phenomenological categories, Holy Spirit is no longer viewed as "person" but as "event." When one exists eschatologically, he is said to *be* faith. Faith is the reflexive side of Holy Spirit. The internal power which energizes this mode of being-in-the-world, Holy Spirit is the hermeneut which makes possible and sustains eschatological faith. "Presence" increasingly becomes the way Michalson refers to the reality of Holy Spirit. Within the horizon of history alone, the possibilities of transmission of Presence from one era to another are contained within the inter-subjective structure of eschatological history itself. The mediating matrix of this eschatological mode of existence is the liberating language of love which occurs as parabolic proclamation. Therein does the final presence of God happen as meaning for man.

To project beyond the solution that Carl Michalson developed in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit cannot be done by simply taking up where he left off. The question of methodology itself must first be raised. Furthermore, it was not for Michalson a matter of merely drawing the implications from his methodology of what the doctrine of the Holy Spirit would look like. Rather, in the true sense of the hermeneutical spiral, the reality of the Holy Spirit as the

eschatological presence of God was a determinative factor in the development of his methodological prolegomenon.

Therefore, with due recognition of the historical fluidity of any doctrine, the process to be followed is one of dialog. The focal concern is one of methodology. The implications drawn will be toward a possible contemporary understanding of the Holy Spirit. Yet, in the true sense of the hermeneutical spiral, the reality of the Holy Spirit as the eschatological presence of God will be the determinative factor in the development of my own methodological prolegomenon. I call my theologizing "hermeneutical celebration." That is descriptive of both the goal and the process. Theologizing in this sense is not limited to conceptual formulations, but is developed in the living out of a life style. It is beyond the scope of this essay to display the "whole" of the methodology. Yet, how can one judge what is being said without some sense of the cohesive interrelationship of this developing methodology? Since the two contemporary "systems" of thought most influential in my theologizing are the New Hermeneutic and phenomenology, my own thought and that of Carl Michalson in the third stage of his career approximate each other. Through both implication and explication the differences will become evident.

## I.

A. The Christian exists simultaneously in three different worlds: (1) the world of historical tradition, especially that of the Bible, which provides for him witnesses to authentic eschatological existence; (2) the world of everydayness (*Alltäglichkeit*), where one's existential questions and societal quests are given birth and lived out; (3) the world of the Church, which is the *koinonia* community of love and concern and which at any given moment is the clearing for the history of the transmission of Christian *Lebenswelt*. He has his rootage in nature. His teleological source is in God, who comes to him through Spirit. The way in which one either coordinates these into a unified life or fails to do so determines his being-in-the-world. This complex and subtle process of coordination is a matter of hermeneutics.

B. In a primal sense one receives and responds to the many worlds around him through images. Jesus reflected this by speaking in parables. One participates in life, even as a "passive" listener through the pictures that are impressed upon and flash through one's mind. Heinrich Ott's attempted advance in dealing with the question of the continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith has been to understand the very nature of historical reality to be "appearance," to be a picture.<sup>1</sup> Even though in the final analysis Ott

1. Heinrich Ott, *Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus und die Ontologie der Geschichte* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1960); translated into English as "The Historical Jesus and the



failed to deal with it properly, it is highly suggestive and needs to be pursued further at this point.

Ott borrowed the image of "picture" from Martin Kähler, who meant by the concept neither a copy nor a duplicate but Jesus himself in his *act of self-manifestation*. This is possible because of the time concept applied to the understanding of event: "What happened at one time and place as an event the historian can locate in time is still not the whole event, the event in its total reality."<sup>2</sup> Nothing "historical is finished and settled; rather everything historical extends its being — that is, its significance — into time, into the future and into the present time of every knower."<sup>3</sup> The biblical picture of Jesus is accurate, therefore, because it portrays Jesus Christ as he appeared to his apostles and the early primitive Christian community. According to Ott, that is what it means for an event to extend itself in time.

The picture of Jesus in the apostolic witness is the unique impression which Jesus' appearance made upon the minds of his disciples. This picture is Jesus himself as he influenced his disciples, as he influences us also through their witness, and as he has appeared and still appears to the church in every age through the mediation of the Word — but really Jesus himself then and not only some opinion about him!

... To know Jesus Christ through the picture which the Bible presents is to believe in him.<sup>4</sup>

Ott finds within this understanding an ontological interpretation of history: "All historical reality which we experience has a picture-like character."<sup>5</sup> That is to say, our experience of reality is not that of *bruta facta* but always with that of "pictures." "The pictures are primary; the facts are a secondary abstraction."<sup>6</sup>

But then, Ott makes a strategic mistake which undoes all the advancing covered up to this point. He separates the picture of the event and the picture of the receiver. Maintaining that the event comes to a person and impresses itself upon him in the form of pictures, he indicates that then a person *creates for himself* a picture of the impression of reality he has received from the picture. In stating it the way he has, Ott has separated the receiver from the Event.

Ontology of History," *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*, selected, translated and edited by Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 142-171.

2. "The Historical Jesus and the Ontology of History," 147f.

3. *Ibid.*, 159.

4. *Ibid.*, 159f.

5. *Ibid.*, 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 161.

How close he was! He rightly claims there is no access to reality which precedes experience and that one can have experience only of a picture. But he stops short of having one "participate" in the picture, even though earlier he had spoken of history in just this way. What he should have proposed was that event comes to a person as picture in such a way as to invite one *into* the picture, to engulf one into the reality which comes beckoning to him as picture. Interpretation is part of the event itself. That is the way an historical event "happens." To be sure, there is an "initiating impulse" (what Michalson refers to as "originating event") which can be lifted up because its synthesizing or intensifying quality creates a new world of meaning significant enough to call attention to itself, to stand out in the midst of a picture and claim the right to be an image worthy of participation. When a person sees himself *as part of the picture*, participating in the picture, then and only then has the picture become a part of him. Then, and only then, has he been grafted into the internality of the picture itself so that he understands himself to be one with the reality — a reality which would be different if one were not a part of it. A world has been won because one not only has caught what has been thrown him but that which has been thrown him has caught him. A "caught-upness" happens and event and person are no longer separated. They are "one world." That is what it means to experience existence in a fully historical way. Ott, by mulling too long over the question of being, feels compelled to discover what it is that lies *behind* the picture rather than becoming thoroughgoing in what was already claimed: the reality and the picture are one and the same. Michalson was correct to resist this enticement by Ott and to set a thoroughgoingly historical understanding over-against an ontologically oriented seduction of history. Ott must go *behind* the picture to the reality, to the ontos of the ontic. No, the horizons of history set the perimeters of historical reality. The picture *is* the reality. Ott has said so himself: "'Pictures' are not things which arise at a later time; they are the reality itself in the act of making itself known. Thus historical reality, perhaps all reality, is disclosed as an endless field, an endlessly surging and rolling sea of interpretations."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, Ott becomes nervous over the relativity of such thoroughgoingness. If it is "picture" in which we participate and if it has a depth dimension to it, an "endless field," the structure is present for including various interpretations *of* the picture *within* the picture. From where I stand in the picture, this is the way I experience the picture. I focus upon some elements of the picture more than I do others. Someone else focuses upon some elements of the picture in greater degree than I do. Given the perimeters of the horizon of the picture, in dialog we wrestle from within the picture

to understand it. Each moment of dialog becomes itself a part of the picture.

This alternative Ott does not propose. Rather, he resorts to an historical solution. The basic ontology of history is not to be found in history at all. In spite of all the groundwork laid before, Ott now surprises us with the admission that there is after all a *Ding an sich*. But he has already said that is impossible within history. Brute facts are historically unavailable. So what is his solution? The *ontology of history is the view of the all-seeing eye of God*. In a paragraph out of the book of Pannenberg, Ott claims:

the real nature of history and of particular events can only be known when history has achieved its goal; that is, when there will no longer be new encounters and interpretations (for the future of every event is an intrinsic part of it). God, however, sees history, as it were, from the standpoint of its goal. He sees it *sub specie aeternitatis*; he sees it eschatologically. We, however, stand within history and can never transfer ourselves over to God's standpoint.<sup>8</sup>

Positivism, which was laid to rest earlier by Ott, is now resurrected and exalted to the place of highest position. The *brutum factum* is now placed in the eye of God. By faith we see what God sees, though only dimly.

Yet even today we have access to knowledge of an eschatological character — the knowledge of *faith*. But the meaning of history as a whole, as an overall plan, is not disclosed to us in faith. At this point we would have to speak of the Holy Spirit, of his constitutive relation to faith, of the inner testimony of the Spirit, who in the encounter with Christ through his picture in the Word of the Gospel works in us the assurance of faith and therefore also assures us that in faith we have not falsely but rightly understood the Christ event. Here faith manifests itself as eschatological knowledge, as an eminent exception in comparison to all inner worldly understanding or knowing of "pictures," which remains inescapably in the grip of the problematic of all phenomenality.<sup>9</sup>

Just when all seems bogged down in relativism, the Holy Spirit comes to the rescue, *deus ex machina par excellence!*

Though Michalson was dealing with the issue of continuity rather than trying to save a system, this position by Ott in relation to the continuity of all historical events is similar to the one held by

8. *Ibid.*, 167.

9. *Ibid.*, 167f.

Michalson during his first (his Barthian!) stage concerning the Holy Spirit as the transhistorical link to all historical moments of the Church. His description of Ott's "Christ-being," which he declares to be invalid, comes close to his own formulation during his first stage of Holy Spirit as *the* constitutive element of continuity of the Church: "the preaching of the church like the apostolic witness derives its validity from its participation in the Christ-being, which is the ontological event continuous in all historic witness to the Christ. The Christ-being is there, *extra nos*, independent of the contingencies of witness."<sup>10</sup>

Why Ott moved in this direction is a mystery because in his essay on "What is Systematic Theology?" he provides the structure for an historical resolution to this issue rather than the retreat given above. Faith is the exclusive horizon of theology. The task of systematic theology is to unfold "the structures of meaning of the one and indivisible meaning-content that is understood in believing."<sup>11</sup> The structures of meaning are "the elements that constitute a meaning-laden, historic unity in its uniqueness as such and that belong indispensably to it . . . the meaning-laden unity is as such indivisible."<sup>12</sup> This is the "picture" of which Ott speaks. Furthermore, Ott sees the unfolding occurring from within the experience (picture) itself: "dogmatics is simply to unfold thoughtfully without presupposing any philosophical schema the meaning-content experienced in believing from within the experience itself."<sup>13</sup> And how does the unfolding proceed? Through the process of dialog: "Dialogue is . . . a basic structure of all existence. Seeking after truth, after understanding, always takes place in dialogue."<sup>14</sup>

## II

Is it possible to maintain the full historicity of "picture" and still provide for an understanding of the Holy Spirit without retreating to a *deus ex machina* as Ott does?

The answer lies in a proper understanding of the depth dimension of "picture" or "image." Images emerge and disappear in one's consciousness constantly. A mind absent of images is a mind sterile in consciousness. A word is spoken and an image appears. One walks into a room and the room is imaged as a whole. Within that encom-

10. Carl Michalson, *Worldly Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 108. Also in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, eds. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., *New Frontiers in Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 150f.

11. Ott, "What is Systematic Theology?," in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, 98.

12. *Ibid.*, 99.

13. *Ibid.*, 110.

14. *Ibid.*, 96. Even within the article, "The Historical Jesus and the Ontology of History," Ott says that "dialogue itself constitutes authentic historical knowledge" (145). Also, see his essay, "Hermeneutics and Personhood," in *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, eds. Stanley Romaine Hopper and David L. Miller (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), 14-33.

passing image many other images take their place. The eye spots a familiar object and an image latent in memory is activated and immediate recognition is the sensation. The encompassing image of the room melts into a more overarching image of the building in which the room is located. That image, too, can take its place within the locale in which the building sits.

The development of one's self-consciousness and one's understanding of the world around him emerges from the imaging of that world. To have an ever-expanding grasp of reality through concentric and overlapping images is to become ever more deeply involved in one's world.

Given this understanding of the role of image, "picture" has the possibility of providing a spatial corridor through time. Certain events — images — in one's life and in the history of the world will have more controlling effect than others. These are paradigmatic events. They create within our consciousness images of corresponding paradigmatic importance. For the Christian, Jesus of Nazareth is such an event; indeed, the paramount paradigmatic event. But that Event is composed of many events, each with its counterpart in the realm of the imagination. The Event of Jesus of Nazareth forms an encompassing image, a picture. I participate in this picture and my participation becomes a part of the picture. A word is spoken by Jesus and I am addressed by it. He acts and I am encountered by that. Even if it confronts someone else through word or deed, I must deal with it from where I stand. The event "catches me up" so that I cannot detach myself from it. Since it is Jesus who is acting and speaking, he becomes for me the author of possibility.

Through exegesis I focus on smaller units of the encompassing image. Each pericope provides a picture in which I participate. Each picture is itself a world of meaning. Take, for instance, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. The most primitive of those standing in the picture with me is the report by Mark the Evangelist which has two events immediately juxtaposed to each other: the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the descent upon Jesus of the Spirit in the form of a dove accompanied by a direct address to Jesus as "a voice from heaven." The latter is a theological overlay which mythologically attempts to interpret the significance of this event for Jesus. Matthew accepts Mark's structure, except that the direct address by the voice from heaven becomes an announcement for *all to hear* who this Jesus is. Luke, on the other hand, has separated the two events. Indeed, the baptism by John is referred to simply as a past event. The action reported is of Jesus in prayer immediately before the Spirit descends upon him. This discounting of the water baptism by John the Baptist and the heightening of the centrality and singularity of the Spirit baptism, coupled with a declaration as to who Jesus is, reaches its extreme in the Gospel of John. There, with the twin motivations of annulling any suggestion of superiority of John over Jesus and of amplifying the inner relationship between Jesus and the

Spirit, no mention is made at all of Jesus' being baptised by water at the hands of John. Instead, John the Baptist bears witness to the Spirit's having descended upon Jesus and to a divine message that "this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." Furthermore, John gives testimony that this is the Son of God (John 1:32-4).

We are all part of the picture together. Knowing something about the theology of each of these Evangelists, I can enter into dialog with them about the picture of which we are a part. We each have focused upon the same moment in history because of its potential significance. All else has been bracketed out so that this event might be elevated to the position of primal event in its moment of initiating impulse. My concern becomes to examine closely the meaning of the water baptism of Jesus. This was a baptism of repentance: "John . . . appeared . . . preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4b). Matthew puts it in direct address: "Repent, for the reign of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). What does it mean for Jesus to accept and undergo a baptism of repentance? Jesus, as a Jew of his day, understood sin not from an individual standpoint alone nor from that of the corporate people of God alone. For us Westerners, individualized as we are, it is difficult for us to grasp the strange blending of the two. As an individual, one repented for the salvation of the nation. When one repented, it was for the sins of the people of Israel. When Jesus comes to accept a baptism of repentance, he is taking upon himself the sins of Israel, just as when he dies upon the cross, he takes upon himself the sins of the world. That is the nature of repentance within community: to take upon oneself the sins of others for their sake or for that of the community. Such a baptism of repentance does not take place just at the moment when John lays his hands upon Jesus and he is baptized in water. It takes place throughout the entire ministry of Jesus, each act an act of obedience finally ending in his death. Every time during his ministry that Jesus entered into the hurt and guilt, the suffering and captivity, the illness and alienation of the world, he took upon himself the sins of the people. When Jesus performed an act of ministry in the midst of brokenness or separation, it was an act of repentance for that brokenness or separation intending wholeness for those involved. To intend wholeness is what it means to live out a baptism of repentance "*eis aphesin hamartion*." Each time was a living out of his baptism at the hands of John. The image of that moment of his baptism of repentance with John — the picture of which I am now a part — informed the life of Jesus.

Standing in the midst of this picture with its focal point upon Jesus under the water, I too have my life informed. His image becomes my image. His ministry becomes my ministry.

When Mark combined the baptism by John with the descent of the Spirit, he was raising the general act of baptism to one of anointment. When applied specifically to Jesus it stands in the tradition of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon the Kings of Israel at the time of

their anointing (cf. the story in I Samuel concerning the kingship of Saul and that of David, I Samuel 10, 16). Professor Rolf Knierim has analyzed these Old Testament references in his article on "The Messianic Concept in the First Book of Samuel:"<sup>15</sup>

the emphasis was on anointing, not through the people, but through Yahweh.... He is... authorized... by Yahweh. This messianic concept is, therefore, a specific form of the prophetic understanding of the kingdom (30).... the anointing of Saul and David... belong neither to the enthronement nor to the public act of power. Its immediate consequence is the possession of the Spirit. The first concern of this strata is... to show that the anointing brings about the transference of the Spirit of Yahweh. This leads to two conclusions. a. The picture of the bearer of power and the king is that of the authorized bearer of the Spirit... b. The receiving of the Spirit, the display of power, and the enthronement are a consequence of the anointing (31)... Saul and David are... principally bearers of the Spirit.... The function of the anointing charisma is that Yahweh grants victory to the anointed, and through him to the people (32 - 33).... these texts do not narrate just any story. It is the story and theology of the messiah, of the representative between Yahweh and Israel who is called into a special position (41).

Without the anointing of the Spirit of Yahweh, the Messiah is without power — a vivid image. Accordingly, Acts 10:38 says that "God *anointed (echrise)* Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit."

In moving the image from one of baptism to one of anointing Mark elevates it to the all controlling image in the life of Jesus. All that is done throughout his ministry is done as the bearer of the Spirit of Yahweh. Jesus moves forth "driven by the Spirit" (Mark 1:12) and therefore also in the power of the Spirit. With theological precision Mark maintains the thrust of the baptism of repentance through the words spoken from heaven: "Thou art my beloved Son: with thee I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11) These words reflect the image of the suffering servant, coming as they do (at least, in part) from the Ebed-Yahweh songs of Deutero-Isaiah: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom I delight; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations." (Isaiah 42:1)

The interpretation of Jesus' baptism of repentance through the Holy Spirit, as has already been indicated, was not only agreed to by

15. Rolf P. Knierim, "The Messianic Concept in the First Book of Samuel," *Jesus and the Historian*, ed. by F. Thomas Trotter (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 20-51. The pages from which the quotes are taken are indicated in parentheses within the ongoing flow of the quote.

the other Evangelists but the focus became entirely on the anointing by the Spirit, so much so that John the Evangelist chooses not even to mention the baptism of repentance.

Yet, having determined that the initiating impulse of this picture was in the context of the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, I must move with severe caution in accepting such an interpretation which sees within the event an act of the Holy Spirit.

### III.

In the final stage of his life Michalson described the "point of juncture" between "God's aggressive love for man and man's faithful response" as a "*unio verbalis*": "the dialogical coalescence of two vocative words, the truly divine command, and the truly human response, without separation or confusion."<sup>16</sup> The name of this juncture was Jesus of Nazareth. But all Michalson did was to describe. He provided no hint as to the philosophical structure by which this could be understood. The possibility of this lies through the development within historical categories of an eschatological, prophetic understanding of "primal thinking." Such should help to interpret the happening of the moment of Jesus' baptism of repentance. What uncovering of reality occurred there?

A. First, it must be recognized that in the final analysis one is faced with Mystery when dealing with any phase of the reality of God. This becomes vividly acute when attempting to limit one's conceptualization and imagination to historical formulations. To identify God with the objects of our history in any way is to mythologize in the Bultmannian sense of that term. To speak in poetic or psychological or experiential or mystical or any other non-objective fashion is to move into the realm of multi-interpretation.

The mystery of which we speak cannot be disclosed or resolved in any way; . . . it remains a mystery under all circumstance. And so there is only one possibility in relation to it, and that is for man to open himself to this mystery and to let himself be penetrated by what happens in it in such a way that his own being is wholly claimed by this happening.<sup>17</sup>

When the framework is thoroughlygoingly historical one's understanding and participation will be thoroughlygoingly relativistic. Judgments are judgments characterized by risk.

B. Second, while God is Mystery, His transcendence is a conditional one. On the one hand, He is transcendent of our sure know-

16. Michalson, *Worldly Theology*, 166.

17. Friedrich Gogarten, "God the Father of Jesus Christ," *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, XX, 1 & 2 (Fall-Winter, 1966-67), 41.



ledge of him. God's transcendence, like His Mystery, is the counterpart of man's relativistic posture. On the other hand, He — the ever-loving, ever-moving, ever-coming, ever-creating Presence in His action toward humankind and by extension toward all creation. By his own initiative He overcomes His transcendence which our hermeneutical inadequacy and inability impose upon Him. By God's own design and action, infinity challenges finitude; eternity stands in the midst of the present. In his transcendence God is known as boundary, as limit. In his initiated Presence God is known as possibility, as teleological source.

C. Third, one's description and analysis does not have the effect of establishing God's existence but of clarifying the meaning of the God-relation. One begins not with an idea of God which he must then verify or prove. From within a world created by an event — for the Christian this world is usually the communal reality of eschatological *Lebenswelt* known as the Church — one begins with an already existing, confronting Presence.<sup>18</sup>

Michalson rejected the concept of "primal thinking" as developed by Heinrich Ott because it tempted us into the depths of mysticism and concentration upon the being of God rather than focusing upon historical meaning for our lives lived out *in the midst of* the world. Michalson's problem was that he took Ott's interpretation of Heidegger as being correct and therefore rejected Heidegger's historical understanding of primal thinking. To be sure, there is an increasingly mystical bent to Heidegger's thought. Ott, however, leapt over the historical grounding in Heidegger. In *Being and Time* Heidegger concentrated upon *Dasein* — person — to raise the central question, Why is there something rather than nothing? The question of the Being of beings is broadened in scope in his later years. *Dasein* is incorporated into "Thing" and the question of being is raised by the very presence of any Thing. A Thing is a meeting, an assemblage, not an object. It is to be seen as forming a Quadrangle of four aspects of Being: earth and heaven, mortals and gods. In "The Thing"<sup>19</sup> Heidegger considers a pitcher to describe what he means. The pitcher is defined in terms neither of the technology of producing it nor of the material composition which forms its bottom and sides but in terms of its equipmentality for containing and pouring. Its materiality is its equipmentality. Heidegger meditates upon this essence to

18. Or, perhaps, it is the nullifying event of the absence of Presence. As Friedrich Gogarten observed: "contemporary man . . . is the one who threatens himself with the nothing. . . . The nothing, over against which man sees himself, grows. . . . It is the man who is threatened in such an acute way by the nothing who . . . is capable of hearing in it the question about God." *Ibid.*, 17. In either case, as nothing or as Presence, the basic reality of God is Mystery.

19. Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 163-186. This was a lecture given at the Bayerischen Akademie der Schönen Künste, on June 6, 1950. It was printed in the *Jahrbuch der Akademie*, Band I, *Gestalt und Gedanke*, 1951, 128ff. and was included in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Gunther Neske, 1954), a collection of Heidegger's writings.

describe the Thing of the pitcher: *earth*, which provides the water from the springs and wine from the vine; *sky*, which offers the rain to the springs and the sun's nourishment to the wine-grapes; *mortals*, whose thirst is quenched and heart is warmed; *gods*, who have offerings presented to them. These four facets of Being mirror each other which simultaneously liberates each unto its own proper self and "binds what is liberated into the Oneness of their essential mutuality."<sup>20</sup> Earth and heaven, mortals and gods are the structural elements of "world." In other words, the Thinghood of a thing is to be seen in terms of world. "The world presences by worlding. That means: the world's worlding cannot be explained by anything else nor can it be fathomed through anything else . . . causes and grounds remain unsuitable for the world's worlding."<sup>21</sup> The Thing can no longer be referred to as a "mere thing," an entity to which meaning must be added. Instead, as a world of happening, the Thing becomes the bestower of meaning and in this world a person "participates" not as Cartesian subject but as one side of a quadrangle of dynamic interaction. Thus the *many* elements of Thing are understood in the *One*-ness of world, the only possible solution for the problem of the One and the many when time, temporality, is the horizon for any understanding of Being.<sup>22</sup> The many of Thing is experienced in the One-ness of world. When Thing is seen as *Gestalt*, the being of Thing is exposed.<sup>23</sup> As one considers the being of an entity, what is lit up is world and in the process of world emerging, and only then, does Being itself disclose itself. That is what it means to speak of Truth and Being-in-the-world. World becomes the Open, the *Lichtung*. Therein is the primal understanding of Thing. Function and figure, *Geschichte* and *Gestalt* become the distinguishing characteristics of the being of a Thing. In the consideration of concrete reality, being is uncovered. The being uncovered is the being of Thing, not being as such. Within the world of each Thing, I come to know the being of that particular Thing. This process of knowing is primal thinking.

#### IV.

Is it possible to speak of the Presence of God, i.e., the Holy Spirit, when one is committed to a thoroughlygoing historical framework

20. Heidegger, "Das Ding," 178 (my translation); compare with "The Thing," 179.

21. *Ibid.*, 179ff.

22. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 19.

23. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (New York: The Modern Library, 1964), 687; also found in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 64. Another solution to the question of the One and the many is projected by Heidegger, as well. See, for instance, "Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .," *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1944). It is this latter which is influential in the thought of Ott.

for formulation of the Gospel? In the light of the above discussion, a modification of Michalson's four-dimensional understanding of history should provide a way of developing an historically oriented understanding of primal thinking, which is in keeping with the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth. At this stage I shall limit the projected solution to a regional ontology, that of human history.

Michalson had spoken of history as being composed of four dimensions: world history, biblical history, existential history, and eschatological history. Because they are dimensions, they exist simultaneously, both spatially and temporally. The *tropos* of their existential convergence was the consciousness of person. On several occasions in my presence Michalson referred to *The Hinge of History* as a "bad book." Usually, this would be his initial response to someone's quoting from *Hinge*. He never elaborated. It may have been he felt it was too existentialistic. Whatever the reason, he seemed, as a consequence of his feelings about *Hinge*, to leave it behind to press on with uncovering the possibilities in the world of *Lebenswelt*. That was a mistake. It was not in contradiction to *Lebenswelt*. Quite the contrary! His dimensional structure not only could find its place within the context of *Lebenswelt*, but grant it fibre and sinew. The dimensional analysis provided a framework by which to comprehend the specific materiality of *Lebenswelt*.

If the private consciousness (of his existentialistic stage) is set within a public world (of his phenomenological period), then the locus of person is set within the structure of "world."

Such a shift and relocation carries with it real potential for a contemporary understanding of the Holy Spirit. Closer examination, therefore, needs to be given, first, to the concept of *Lebenswelt*, and second, to the changes this provokes in Michalson's dimensional approach to Theology as History.

A. Michalson saw in the concept of *Lebenswelt*, the notion of the human life-world, "the most suggestive philosophical warrant for the reality of faith."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, *Lebenswelt* is "the only medium in which" the "dimension of faith . . . can occur."<sup>25</sup> With its understanding of the depth and range of human freedom, *Lebenswelt's* value lies "in its opening up a fuller understanding of the structure of the world in which alone questions of faith can be profitably discussed."<sup>26</sup> While maintaining the hiddenness of God beyond the deceased metaphysical gods, he sought to discover a way to speak in non-religious language of God's being present to man as Possibility. Throughout his career, Michalson spoke recurrently of the Holy Spirit as "Presence" and "Possibility."

24. Carl Michalson, review of William Earle, et al., *Christianity and Existentialism in Journal of Existentialism*, V, 20 (Summer, 1965), 441.

25. *Ibid.*, 444.

26. *Ibid.*, 445.

(1) The Phenomenology of Presence

Here was the structure for which he had been searching to allow him to deal adequately with the concept of history. A "human world which is prior to all other worlds, organizing and giving them meaning,"<sup>27</sup> *Lebenswelt* is the structure of reality called history. This is the reason Michalson saw *Lebenswelt* as offering the most significant possibility for understanding the reality of the faith. *Lebenswelt* became the way to speak of the materiality of historical faith. It is the materiality of historical faith.

History for Michalson, "is not a description of events occurring on the surface of a world not history. History is a world, a *Lebenswelt*, a world of its own, the world it shapes."<sup>28</sup> Therein lies its materiality. This development in Michalson is not simply a parrot of Heidegger's concept of world but is a part of his dialog with Heidegger. In Heidegger "world" comes to Dasein as the most constitutive element of his fate. Primordially and *a priori* are highlighted because "world" is there and Dasein is a part of it before Dasein realizes it. Whereas, in Michalson, although the world is there for man and he is a part of it before he realizes it, the world does not come to one as fate, but as a result of the historical actions of persons.

This world is not a neutral field existing outside men. It is the field of force they help comprise. Man is in this world, not alongside it. He is in it not as something to which he belongs but as something which belongs to him and for which he is responsible. History becomes a world only through the mediation of man. Man is with this world as a family is with its home — not inserted into it as from the outside, as a coin in a box, but integral to it, enmeshed in it, living by it as it lives by him.<sup>29</sup>

This is the meaning of "Being-in-the-world": it is not alongside but *in* the world. Here Michalson and Heidegger are together. They separate on the issue of fate versus responsibility and that can have far-reaching implications of how one has his being-in-the-world for it will shape "world" itself. While Heidegger supported the Third Reich, Michalson was a part of the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Just how is one *in*-the-world?

When one comes to know the world, that "knowing" is not oneself as subject and the world as object in a Cartesian stance but

27. Carl Michalson, Review of John Daniel Wild, *Human Freedom and Social Order: An Essay in Christian Philosophy* in *Theology Today*, XVIII, 2, (July, 1960), 242.

28. Carl Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 64f.

29. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, 65.

it occurs "in-the-world." The intention, for Heidegger, is to speak of a phenomenon prior to the phenomena of subject and object. For Michalson, the intention is likewise to speak of phenomenon rather than the phenomena of subject and object, but this phenomenon is not so much prior to the phenomena of subject and object but one that has been reached through conscious effort. "The world of meaning is a structure with a very definite shape. It is an interworld defined by the mutual interpenetration of subjects and objects."<sup>30</sup> Over against Heidegger's *Dasein* who, like Adam, becomes aware of being a part of the picture but, prior to that awareness, had existed primordially in-the-world, Michalson speaks with the forcefulness of the person who is on the front line of battle: "The world of meaning is constructed out of mutual participation of subjective sentiment for meaning and objective sedimentation of meaning."<sup>31</sup> When the two meanings come together, history is formed, world is "worlded."

The essence of the formulation is meaning, a reality neither subjective nor objective because existing as an interworld in which there are no objects but only objects-for-subjects, and a world in which there are not subjects, but only subjects-for-objects. Historical understanding is a process which occurs in this human world of intersubjectivity.<sup>32</sup>

The process is one of interaction, a kind of fluctuation back and forth among the elements involved: "The world of history is an interworld of subjects-which-are-objects and objects-which-are-subjects, where the conditions for a complete life prevail."<sup>33</sup> "Every object to be historical implicates a subject. Every subject to be historical indicates an object."<sup>34</sup> In the world of history man is not a being who is added to nature nor one who finds himself in a natural paradise called the Garden of Eden. Before God, one is creature. *In-the-world*, one's primary role is not that of creature, created by the world, but that of creator of the world in which one finds himself: "He is the creator of a different species of world, *no part of which is comprehensible apart from him*."<sup>35</sup>

That world does not exist apart from one's relationship, one's being-in-the-world, because one is so intricately a part of that world that it does not exist apart from him. "The world man lives in is

30. *Ibid.*, 61.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 65.

34. *Ibid.*, 77.

35. *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

always a world modified by man's being there." At the same time, the "nature of the truth about the worlds to which we relate will be relative to the radically different structures which obtain in these worlds."<sup>36</sup>

Michalson's theology was a parabolic theology. That was a key element in the phenomenological base he was developing for the doing of theology. He concentrated on the concrete experiences of life that contain within them a whole world of meaning. From such focusing, the *Lebenswelt* emerges into consciousness. When *Lebenswelt* emerges in this manner, it emerges as the structure which allows presence to be present. If world has a fundamental expressibility all its own, then it carries with it a "structure of presence." One is granted a presence by "world." "The function of history as meaning is to provide human life with a structure of presence."<sup>37</sup> Since the "world has an historical reality by virtue of man's life in it,"<sup>38</sup> that structure is

a matrix of relationships within which one derives the meaning of one's own existence. World is not a space which pre-exists one's participation in it. It is the relationship which comes to fulfillment as one has his being in it. World is not the box one is in. World is the mode of one's being-in.<sup>39</sup>

Presence does not come from outside world. It coinheres germanely with the act of being-in-the-world and is determined by the mode of one's being-in. Indeed, the being-in for the Christian is eschatological. Therein lies the key to presence for the Christian.

## (2) The Presence of God

Given the phenomenological framework within which to work, how does one go about pointing to the presence of God in history? Surely not by identification with history itself. That would not only perpetuate the mythological tendency of the Church but would also aggrandize the world of mythology. In an address on "Faith and the Real Presence of the Hidden God" which Michalson was delivering in various places shortly before his death, he considers and rejects several other alternatives:

— one cannot find God in nature because the beauty of the earth in one place may be an avalanche in another while the good health of one person is contrasted with the cancer of another. "If

36. Michalson, Review of John Wild, *Human Freedom and Social Order*, 243.

37. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, 84.

38. Michalson, Review of John Wild, *Human Freedom and Social Order*, 243.

39. Michalson, *Worldly Theology*, 206.

we begin by trying to know God from nature, we could end cursing Him.”;

— one cannot look for God in human nature for while it is the finest manifestation of nature, it is fraught with wretchedness. “If we try to look for God in human nature, we could also end by cursing Him.”;

—one cannot find God in the conscience because while it is the most sensitive dimension of human nature, one knows all too well what is on his conscience. That could lead to fear and “what we fear, ultimately we hate.” If we try to look for God in the human conscience, we could end by hating Him.

Michalson recommends we heed the advice of Luther. He proposes that the only true way to know the Hidden God is the way God Himself has chosen to make Himself known.

According to the Christian faith, God has chosen to make Himself known in the person of His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, which we refer to as revelation. Now when I say revelation, I do not mean that the hidden God has come out of hiding . . . His hiddenness is not an accident, it is of His essence. God does not come out of hiding. What does He do when He reveals Himself? He rehidess himself in human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth . . . Who would have thought to look for Him there? I mean, God on the breast of Mary, God in a carpenter shop, God at the back of a fisherman’s boat. God on a cross! Who would have thought to look for him there?<sup>40</sup>

Michalson refers to this as “the apostle character of Jesus of Nazareth.” That is, “he discerned Himself as the one in whom God was making himself present in our history.”<sup>41</sup> This is “the evangelical scandal.” Not the scandal of the cross nor the meta-physical scandal of how one person can contain two natures, “but the historical scandal of how a carpenter can substitute for God. When Jesus spoke of himself he said the things that pertain to God.”<sup>42</sup> To know who Jesus is, is to know who God is; to hear him is to hear God. “He and the father are one in an auditory moment.”<sup>43</sup> But one must be cautious here. To behold Jesus “is

40. Carl Michalson, “Faith and the Real Presence of the Hidden God, in *The Witness of Radical Faith*, ed. by Olin M. Ivey and Gordon E. Michalson (Nashville: Tidings, 1974), 71f.

41. *Ibid.*, 72.

42. Carl Michalson, “Jesus Christ as Word Become Flesh,” *The Christian Century*, LXXVII, 18 (May 3, 1961), 552; *Worldly Theology*, 164.

not to understand him as a man, not as a God, nor even as a man in the presence of God. To behold Jesus is to understand oneself as a man in the presence of God."<sup>44</sup> That is what it means to say that Jesus is the word of God become flesh.

### (3) The Continuity of the Presence of God

Michalson has already ruled out a trans-historical solution to the presence of God. That is to say, the traditional doctrine of the Holy Spirit cannot be called upon to make Jesus Christ present to us today and, therefore, to make the presence of God present to us. Tempting as it may be, the history of the transmission of *traditions* must be rejected. To be sure, traditions are transmitted but these are part of a larger picture.

The God whom Jesus names makes himself known not beyond or beneath our individual histories, but within them. That indicates the historical ultimacy of the Christian's archetype. *Historical* mediation is of the essence of a faith in which it is believed that God is present in history. All history is thought to derive its hope from the event in which God is named.<sup>45</sup>

When the presence of God becomes present, that occurrence happens because of the history of the transmission of *Lebenswelt*, a particular *Lebenswelt* of eschatological existence which is announced and made possible by Jesus of Nazareth. Michalson nowhere says this in precisely these terms but this appears to be his solution and I want to celebrate the hermeneutical potentiality it holds.

As a wholistic vision, the history of the transmission of *Lebenswelt* overcomes some of the limitations of the inventive and enticing concept of the history of the transmission of traditions. The latter was the transmission of abstractions, of bits and pieces, from the life of the community that created or found meaningful a particular tradition. The former, however, is the transmission of the vibrancy and vitality of the life of the community itself. The traditions are transmitted with the reality but the swirling energy of the world of the Christian community itself is the carrier of the traditions.

What is needed is the development of the concept of the Church in terms of *Lebenswelt*, whereby the continuity of the Church is to be found in the history of the transmission of *Lebenswelt*.

(a) The Church stands in the middle as a point of historical transition between the announcement of the Kingdom of God in the life

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Michalson, *Worldly Theology*, 189.



of Jesus and its final realization. As such, it is an eschatological reality creating a world wherein the covenant of God with human history is realizable. Because in this covenant of God with human history the final age of history's maturity appears, to participate in it is to have historical access to maturity in history. To participate in it is to experience the *permanent meaning* communicated by the event of Jesus of Nazareth as an attribute of God's being present. The Reign of God is the Presence of God in his wholistic intentionality for man. The Church's responsibility is to celebrate that intentionality in such a way that it becomes efficacious for the totality of life, i.e., that the entirety of life is lived in the conscious awareness of the Spirit of God.

(b) The Church and the Re-creation of History. Because the Christian faith is of the structure of history, the "Christian history itself creates history."<sup>46</sup> Michalson spoke of "*originating* (epoch-making) events, like marriages, revolution, and declarations of independence" and "*explicative* (epochal) events," which are "the living out of the implications in the special events."<sup>47</sup> In making such a distinction he failed to take into consideration both the dynamics of *Lebenswelt* and the eschatological forces of the Christian faith. There are also "*celebrative* events" which while living out the implications in the special events do so within the world created by the "originating" events and in such a way that the originating experience happens again with its full creative force. Michalson said it himself:

With the birth of meaning, . . . community of meaning is created . . . the story of God's saving deeds constitutes the Church as a community of believers. The community lives by its recollection simply because when the story is told the fulness of time is at hand . . . The creative power of the Christian story, therefore, cannot be a device for consolidating an orderly society behind what the early Fathers called "the wall of the Church." To define the Church without reference to its history-creating mission would be to relapse into the pattern of the old Israel which resisted the Holy Spirit, making a Temple of what was meant to be a tent.<sup>48</sup>

The apostle character of the disciples is that they discerned Jesus as the one who discerned himself as the one in whom God was making himself manifest in our history. To celebrate that reality was to be a part of the eschatological *Lebenswelt* Jesus had presented.

46. Carl Michalson, "What Doth the Lord Require of Us?," *The International Review of Missions*, XLV, 178 (April, 1956), 147.

47. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, 135.

48. Michalson, "What Doth the Lord Require of Us?," 147.

And this is the awaiting apostle character of our time. We would discern ourselves in continuity with Jesus and the apostles in discerning Jesus as the one in whom God, the hidden God, makes Himself present in our history.<sup>49</sup>

The reality of Jesus became the promise of the disciples: "The same will be true of you, my disciples. Those who hear you will hear me; and those who hear me will hear the Father."

This is the mystery, the burden, and the excitement of communicating the true word. In an act, the hidden God is made present. It is word and act. Personally, I am more fond of words. I cannot dance, but I rarely preach without having someone dance at the same time. This is our burden — to let the hidden God be God and to make his presence known through acts of communication.<sup>50</sup>

That is what it means to speak of the history of the transmission of *Lebenswelt*. Historical Christian existence is hermeneutical. Eschatological *Lebenswelt* begets eschatological *Lebenswelt*. When the word is spoken, one hears in a reflexive manner. Jesus proclaims the reign of God; he speaks of God as Father. In the reflexive hearing, a situation is created, presence happens, and one understands himself to be a child of God in the midst of that Presence. One discovers himself engulfed into a new mode of understanding. This Michalson calls faith. In the midst of the relativities of life, one risks all on this being the final word in history because it carries within and creates the conditions for maturity and meaningfulness. When one understands oneself as a child of God, one responsively becomes obedient within that "world" of grace and responsible for the world around him. One grows in the maturity of servanthood and seeks to aid the world in becoming mature in its worldliness.

Michalson has stated the foregoing succinctly: "In Christ God delivers up his rule to men, but continues to reign."<sup>51</sup>

To trust the continuing presence of God in the world to the Church is a risky venture, to say the least. Such a transmission is fraught with ambiguity and relativity, always subject to being overcome by the wretchedness of historicity, of meaninglessness. Often a *Lebenswelt* of culture rather than an eschatological *Lebenswelt* is transmitted. But therein lies the risk of historical existence. That is the special relationship "originating events" have to history. They serve as correctives to the explicative and celebrative events. For the celebration of Christian eschatological existence there is always the

49. "Faith and the Real Presence of the Hidden God," 72.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Michalson, *Worldly Theology*, 215.

witness to Jesus in the Gospels and other documents which operates as an emendation in any given moment of the transmission. If the trajectory is off course or has been pulled by another world into its orbit, then adjustments can be made, but even these reforms run the risk of miscalculation, of misunderstanding the moment of intersubjectivity called the Church. That possibility will always be present because we are within that moment of intersubjectivity ourselves and not above it. The ultimate meaning of such relativity is that we are human and not God.

Yet, unexplicably, God has entrusted himself to us. We are called upon to celebrate His presence and therein to participate responsibly in the history of the transmission of eschatological *Lebenswelt*.

(c) The Church and the Interworld of Intersubjectivity. Michalson spoke of Jesus of Nazareth as "the open door by which the whole of history may live a history of wholeness."<sup>52</sup> By that he meant that the Christian gospel "speaks to the world in such a way as to evoke a nexus of faith with Jesus Christ, who is the Eternal God's way of being present in history. That presence provides a basis for responsible awareness in history."<sup>53</sup> When one is engulfed in a world that claims that history can be ultimately meaningful because of Christ, indeed, *in* Him, that moment of "historical freedom of final purpose" mobilizes all one's worldly forces to discover how humanity can finally enjoy its life in the world. The force of historical creativity potential in the Christian eschatological *Lebenswelt* can be realized only in the moment of transmission when the Christian community's responsibility for proclamation and the quest for meaning lying within the person meet. "A life of faith like a life of history is an interworld between two poles, a subject and an object."<sup>54</sup> Stated succinctly, the world of intersubjectivity where meaning is uncovered is the locus of history.

Unlike the categories of Kant, historical categories are not exclusively *in the subject, in the knower*. In history the structure of understanding includes the priority of the *object*, not simply as a material given but as an intelligibility outside the knower himself, which affects the moment of understanding as actively as subjective participation does.<sup>55</sup>

There, in the world of intersubjectivity, the process of historical understanding occurs.

B. With this "worldly" understanding of the structure of reality, what possibilities are there for including Michalson's four dimensions

52. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, 135.

53. Michalson, *Worldly Theology*, 191.

54. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, 104.

55. *Ibid.*, 82.

of history? For me, his dimensional structure provides a highly suggestive model. Yet certain innovations are necessary. (1) The contrast between nature and history would change to a contrast between the methodology of scientific investigation and the methodology appropriate to historical investigation. That is what Michalson intended. But his terminology was confusing. There is no particle of the universe that does not have potential meaning for person. Yet, the basic way that and any other particle is approached determines the kind of meaning it will have. (2) The *existentialia* which form the "world" of human consciousness become (a) mundane history, (b) tradition history, (c) existential history, (d) natural history, and (e) eschatological history. These histories find their meeting place in man and form a pentagon which is one's world at any given moment. Each of these "worldly elements" functions in much the same way earth and sky, mortals and gods do in Heidegger's Quadrangle. That is to say, each of these elements forms one dimension of a pentagonal structure of consciousness. Each, therefore, is simultaneously present, both spatially and temporally. Each vies for predominance. Each has a whole world of meaning, its own *Lebenswelt*, which it contributes to the composite of consciousness. Each particularized *Lebenswelt* beckons and calls to the person.

Consciousness, therefore, is set within the interworldly context of intersubjectivity, i.e., within the context of *Lebenswelten*. Consciousness discovers itself existing primordially within a *Lebenswelt* whose structure is pentagonal in shape. The *existentialia* of one's existence have emerged from the interaction of the various *Lebenswelten*. But when this discovery takes place, consciousness is called upon to choose responsibly what shape it shall take and what shape it shall try to forge in the worlds around it.

a. *Mundane history* is the world of societal quests reflecting the mundane meanderings of people in their posture as political creatures, as citizens of the *polis*.

b. *Tradition history* includes what Michalson intended by both biblical history and eschatological history. It is the continuity of the presence of God through the mediation of historical transmission. Tradition history is the history of the transmission of eschatological *Lebenswelt*, a *Lebenswelt* which emerges out of the dim and hazy twilight of a people who were eventually to form the nation Israel. Jesus of Nazareth stands in the midst of that *Lebenswelt* as the decisive, transforming clarification of eschatological existence. Through the involvement of Jesus the materiality of eschatological *Lebenswelt* is particularized and radicalized as Holy Spirit.

c. *Existential history* is personal search for meaning in life which is characterized basically as meaninglessness. I say basically because there are moments of meaning which occur within this dimension bringing joy, deep insight, gayety, loving outreach, satisfaction, a fleeting sense of worth.

d. *Natural history* is a person's communion with nature, his sense

of oneness or fraternity with the natural elements of the universe. That which threatened me most as a person during my ministry in the inner-city of New York City was the lack of greenness — all was concrete and mortar and steel.

e. *Eschatological history* is the originating presence of God. This is the dimension of Mystery in one's life. This Presence comes not through the history of the transmission of eschatological *Lebenswelt*, but on its own. A part of its purpose is to act as a corrective and refinement on the trajectory and style of that eschatological *Lebenswelt*, the Church. Its eschatology supersedes that of the Church, of tradition history, but, since the advent of Jesus of Nazareth, it will always be in continuity with the eschatological existence exposed in him. Eschatological history is the history of the Holy Spirit. As Michalson claimed in his first stage and later transmuted, the Holy Spirit is one of the *existentia* of persons. It happens at the primordial depth of one's being, so that it happens in all its profundity only in the innermost regions of one's subconsciousness. How it happens is a part of Mystery. It may come as a direct revelation — but even then it is mediated through our interpretation — or as a new synthesizing of one's past history or as an intensification of sensitivity to one's environment. Poetically, one could say that the Spirit is hidden in the interstices of the complexities of personhood, lovingly and persuasively luring one toward fulfillment and wholeness through the presentation of ultimate meaning.

By maintaining both tradition and eschatological history a way is forged within the confines of an historical framework for both the particularized, decisive revelation of Jesus of Nazareth and for continuing revelation. The latter, let it again be said, is always in continuity with the former.

The pentagon of a person's world is seldom, if ever, symmetrical as is that symbol of American military domination. At each moment of one's history the combination of intermeshing influences will be somewhat different from any other portion of that same person's history. Any one of the five can become the controlling history. Both tradition history and eschatological history carry the possibility of ultimate significance for a person's life. Both of these may be consciously absent from one's existence, though the presence of God is there as an *existentiale* even if one is unaware of it. If one is unaware, the influence from this dimension of meaning will be meager. When either tradition history or eschatological history or a combination of the two becomes the controlling factor in existence, there is a decided and decisive shift in one's world. Eschatological world grants eschatological meaning to the one who suddenly discovers himself in the midst of it. Where and when the *Lebenswelt* of eschatological existence comes together with the terminating and renewing quality of eschatological history, there the presence of God as revealed by Jesus is set loose upon historical transmission, is made

known in an especially persuasive manner in the present in one's presence. For Heidegger, in the quadrangular world of Thing it is the Thinghood of Thing, i.e., the being of Thing, not Being as such, that is uncovered. Just so, through the presence of God, man's presence becomes a new presence. It is not God who is being revealed. Only that He is *pro nobis* is revealed. Otherwise, He remains Mystery. God's thrust toward us seems to be for our sake, not for God's. It is man who is being revealed. It is our manhood that is realized in the convergence of *existentialia* into world. This would make room for existence within the finality of the Christian eschatological *Lebenswelt* while still providing for a life that continues to be fraught with ambiguity and relativity. As Michalson himself wrote:

The known world will remain unknown, but there will be no more *fear* of the unknown. Sadness will continue to interrupt us, but it will not dominate us. Enmity will continue to corrode us, but it will not destroy us. Anxiety will continue to distract us, but it will not permanently derange us. Our greed will continue to bias us, our infidelities will continue to shame us, our inflated conceit will make us hard and our frustrated conceit will make us overbearing, but not one of these things will engulf us finally because the final word has been spoken and has brought us to maturity, which is the power to overcome the world.<sup>56</sup>

## V.

It is now possible to answer the question raised about the meaning of the event of Jesus' baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Statements in the interim above provide the structure to understand an event in the life of Jesus.

The act of baptism such as Jesus was to undergo was no ordinary event. Few people go out into the wilderness to submit themselves to an act of purification at the hands of a prophet who is not a part of the established historical procedure. It was a time of deep concientization<sup>57</sup> wherein he would become critically aware of the worlds around him and of who he was in light of the situation. Amazing openness characterizes one at such a time, seeking to discover his creative potential and the power to exercise any responsibility that potentiality might lay upon him. The picture in which I stand is not clear enough to be able to psychoanalyze Jesus or to paint a vivid

56. Michalson, *The Rationality of Faith*, 139. The "world" that is overcome is the world of historicity. It is overcome by the world of eschatological existence.

57. This is the phrase coined by Paulo Freire, whose understanding can be found in its comprehensiveness in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972) or the version in the United States, *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970). In addition one will want to consult other works by Freire: *La*

description of his self-consciousness at that moment. But I do know the baptism is taking place in the midst of a prophetic movement. I also know that in the documents which have survived, the strongest Old Testament force in the interpretation of Jesus by the early primitive Church was that of the words of the prophets, particularly Isaiah. The prophet understood himself to be called by the Spirit, to be empowered by the Spirit, and to be led by the Spirit. Therefore, the image I receive of Jesus' openness at this moment is intense vulnerability to the inspiration of the Spirit. One might describe this as "responsible abandonment." Jesus abandons himself to the guidance of the Spirit and, in so doing, accepts responsibility for living out a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In the stillness of the moment under the baptism, water and Spirit commingle in sacramental primordially. In the underwater quietness the Spirit of God rolls upon the other worlds of Jesus' self-consciousness, clarifying them and sensitizing them. This "worlding" of Jesus is a solidification of his world and creates a solidarity with God and humanity. A moment of primal thinking — yes! But the prayer is one of unification, conscientization, acceptance of responsibility for ministry. And the primal thinking is not concentration upon the being of God but the rearrangement of the many histories of Jesus' self-consciousness into new patterns of expectation. Trans-formed, His imagination is let loose to curl around the potentialities of wholeness for mankind.

Through exegetical study, therefore, I find myself in close proximity to Mark's understanding. Exegesis through the historical-critical methodology is the act of becoming ever more deeply involved in the picture in which one is standing. It is the painting of oneself into the picture. It is a working of oneself into the hermeneutical interdynamics of the situation whereby the depth of the picture becomes increasingly visible. A pictorial translation: others speak in their language; we hear in ours. The fusion of horizons is a standing within the expanding horizon of the picture.

The analysis applied to Jesus in the assemblage of his world is one that can be applied to anyone else. The historical components of the pentagonal structure of Jesus' world are potentially the same for others. Because his world forms for me the crucial paradigmatic image which informs my life and transforms the interstructural relationships of my world, he becomes the model of manhood, the

educación como práctica de la libertad (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, 1969) and the articles in *Contribución al proceso de conscientización en América Latina* which appeared as a special supplement of *Cristianismo y Sociedad* (Montevideo: Junta Latinoamericana de Iglesia y Sociedad, 1968). See also, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, tr. and ed. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973). At the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies held July 23 — August 2, 1973, this whole area was explored by Richard Tholin, "The Holy Spirit and Liberation Movements: The Response of the Church." It and the other addresses given there are published by Tidings of Nashville with Dow Kirkpatrick as the editor.

guiding image for my life. He allowed in his life the Presence of God — the eschatological element of history known as the Holy Spirit — to be the central hermeneutical force “assembling” his world. Therefore, the process is not to mimic Jesus by walking “in his steps” but to be in the same stance of openness to the ordering by the Spirit of one’s own world and to the focusing of one’s responsible attention upon the bringing of wholeness to the other “histories” which make up one’s world.

Only one picture has been explored as a way of dealing with theology as imagination. However, the same process of participation and analysis as a part of that participation will hold for other pictures. Each event of life is an image forming a “moment of meaning” (even if the basic assemblage is one of meaninglessness). By focusing upon these images, the locus of theology is transferred from the sphere of ideation and conceptualization to the realm of one’s everydayness. Beginning where one exists, with what one is up against, with the potentialities presented to one by his past, it is attempting to discern the presence of God — the Holy Spirit — in the midst of what Rainer Maria Rilke called “daily experiencing.”



## **PART TWO:**

# **Biblical Interpretation and Hermeneutics**

# The New Crisis in Biblical Theology

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The situation in which we find ourselves today is not unlike that which Paul once faced when he ventured to give an address in ancient Athens.<sup>1</sup> The Acts of the Apostles (17:21) gives this description of his audience: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." These words are particularly descriptive of our situation. Our passion for novelty, which lately has reached epidemic proportions, is evidenced in a well-known paperback series entitled, *New Theology*. We have read New Theology No. I, New Theology No. II, New Theology No. III, and so on — and apparently the series is open-ended! In this time of "instant theologies," as they have been called, one would expect an essay on the crisis in biblical theology to cater to current interests. I shall resist this temptation, however, for occasionally it is important to try to get our bearings and find out where we are, instead of running off in a new direction or in all four directions at once. The following attempt to reassess the present status of biblical theology, particularly the theology of the Old Testament, is gratefully and affectionately dedicated to my former colleague, Carl Michalson, whose untimely death at the height of his creative power was a major loss for contemporary theology.<sup>2</sup>

"Crisis" is a familiar reality in theology, as can be seen from the pages of *Theology Today*, the journal which is published under the aegis of Princeton Theological Seminary. This journal was launched in 1944 when the world was engulfed in total war. In the language of the devotional preface to the first issue, it was the season of "God's Terrible Springtime," when "fresh winds of God" were blowing with devastating and renewing fury. Speaking for the Editorial Council, President John A. Mackay declared that the

1. This essay is a revised form of my inaugural address at Princeton Theological Seminary, September 1971, on the occasion of installation into the chair of Old Testament Theology. Some of the material of the essay has been printed in *Theology Today* XXVIII (1971), pp. 321-327.

2. This echoes the judgment expressed in my essay, "Carl Michalson's Vision: The Power of the Interpreted Word," *The Christian Advocate*, June 16, 1966, pp. 7-8.

purpose of the journal was to sponsor a "rebirth of vital Christian theology," and specifically, he said, "the Bible, which was rediscovered by the Reformation, must be rediscovered again."<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the initial issue contained an article by Paul S. Minear entitled, "Wanted: A Biblical Theology." And the concluding article by Holmes Rolston was devoted to the commentary on the Epistle to the Romans by Karl Barth, the Swiss pastor who in 1918 sounded the call to rediscover "the strange new world within the Bible." Yet, just over a quarter of a century later, we find ourselves again in a baffling new theological situation. Behind us is the period of "the revival of biblical theology" which was heralded prophetically in the first pages of *Theology Today*. Behind us is the period loosely labeled "neo-orthodox" — a period, I may add, of great theological vitality, for to demythologize a text from Genesis 6, "there were Nephilim [men of gigantic stature] on the earth in those days," men of reknown like Barth and Bultmann, H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and others. Behind us, too, are the swirling changes of the 60's which radically called into question the meaning of religious language in a secular world, which dared to speak of the death of God, and which shook the culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with revolutionary impact.<sup>4</sup> In this new situation the question arises as to whether biblical theology has a future. Already some are speaking of "the death of biblical theology."

## I

An obituary of the past biblical theology movement has been given by Brevard Childs in his recent book, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, especially in Part I entitled "Remembering a Past."<sup>5</sup> Although eulogizing biblical theology for its influence upon churches and seminaries in the period following World War II, Childs declares that this "unified movement," which he labels "distinctively American," collapsed because of weaknesses from within and pressures from without. He outlines several tenets of the "unified consensus" (for instance, "the unity of the whole Bible," "the distinctive biblical mentality," "the revelation of God in history").<sup>6</sup> All of these, he maintains, were tried in the balance and found wanting in scholarship and relevance. In the second part of his book, entitled "Seeking a Future," he expresses the hope

3. Editorial, "Our Aims," *Theology Today*, Vol. I, No. 1 (April 1944), pp. 3-11.

4. See the article by Langdon Gilkey, "Theology in the Seventies," *Theology Today*, XXVII (October 1970), pp. 292-301.

5. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Westminster Press, 1970).

6. The latter premise of biblical theology was attacked by James Barr in his inaugural address at Princeton Theological Seminary, "Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation* XVII (1963), pp. 193-205; reprinted in Martin E. Marty, ed., *New Theology* No. 1 (Macmillan, 1964), pp. 60-74.

that biblical theology, having died as a vital force in theology, will be resurrected in the form it once had before the rise of historical criticism which introduced "a sharp break with the church's exegetical tradition." This emerging form, which he illustrates in the third part of his book entitled "Testing a Method," is one which takes the *canon* as the proper context for biblical interpretation and for making ethical decisions. He does not venture into the question of the nature of the church which defines, and is defined by, the canon or the problem of marginal books like Esther about which ancient rabbis had serious doubts or the Epistle of James which Luther dubbed "an epistle of straw." "The status of canonicity" Childs declares, "is not an objectively demonstrable claim but a statement of Christian belief. In its original sense, canon... is the rule that delineates the area in which the church hears the word of God."<sup>7</sup> Thus the task of biblical theology is to study the Bible as a sacred *book*, whose *texts* are to be read in the framework of the whole canon, which amounts to the framework of faith in Jesus Christ. He objects strenuously to what he regards as "the liberal hermeneutical presupposition that one [comes] to the biblical text from a vantage point outside the text" by setting up some standard, whether the norms of historical criticism, a canon within the canon, or an ontology derived from Heidegger. He writes:

In conscious opposition to this [liberal] approach to hermeneutics, the confession of the Christian canon as the context for biblical theology makes the claim that the "theological data" of the Bible does not lie in some form of positivity behind the text, such as *Heilsgeschichte*, language phenomenology, or in a mode of consciousness illustrated by the text, such as authentic existence or the like. Even though there is an obvious history of development that lies behind the formation of the canon, and even though there are a variety of modes of consciousness involved at various levels and periods, the confession of a canon holds this context to be normative for the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup>

There is much merit in this call for "canonical exegesis."<sup>9</sup> In the past, literary criticism has not given sufficient stress to the final

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

9. See H. J. Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), pp. 344ff.; also George M. Landes, "Biblical Exegesis in Crisis: What is the Exegetical Task in a Theological Context?" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* XXVI, 3 (Spring, 1971), pp. 273-298; Roland Murphy, "Christian Understanding of the Old Testament," *Theology Digest* 18 (1970), pp. 321-332. The latter is cautiously appreciative of Childs's insistence upon the total canon and of N. Lohfink's stress upon the "afterlife" (*Nachleben*) of a text in the history of traditions.

context in which the scriptural tradition is given to us. Franz Rosenzweig once observed that the underrated siglum "R" (which critics have used to refer to the Redactor) should really be interpreted as *Rabbenu*, "our master," for we are profoundly dependent upon his final shaping of the scriptural tradition. A biblical text, after all, must be read in its total canonical context, and for the Christian church this means, as Gerhard von Rad has emphasized, that "we receive the Old Testament from the hands of Jesus Christ," *Rabbenu*.<sup>10</sup>

Before turning attention to the canon, however, let us reflect a bit longer on the events that have brought us to the present crisis. Granted that we are still too much involved in our immediate past for hindsight to provide clarity, it is a bit surprising — and I speak now as a participant in the so-called "biblical theology movement" — to hear that "the old-style biblical theology" of the 50's had the massive and unified strength of "walls" which developed internal cracks and finally collapsed "like a Maginot line" under the artillery fire of radical critics.<sup>11</sup> Those of us who have lived and taught through this tumultuous period know too well that *all* theology — biblical, systematic, philosophical, pastoral — came into difficult straits in the decade of the 60's when religious language became problematic in a secular world, and when a morally sensitive student generation demanded a theology arising out of, and relevant to, action in the contemporary world. If the new generation was "a younger generation in revolt against the biblical theologians," as Childs observes, it was also one that expressed radical discontent with all the traditional structures of theological education. And above all, that generation called into question the Christian tradition which, in some fundamental sense, is anchored to events or traditions of the past. The crucial hermeneutical problem was felt to be the gulf between the historical situation of the biblical texts and a modern world oriented toward the future, in other words, the problem of "the distance in time," as the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx put it.<sup>12</sup>

10. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library (Westminster Press, 1961), p. 41, cites and comments on this remark by Franz Rosenzweig, which can be found originally in M. Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, p. 322.

11. In chapter 4, "The Cracking of the Walls," Childs acknowledges the influence of two scholars in particular. The first is Langdon Gilkey, whose various writings, including his famous essay on "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language" (*Journal of Religion* LXI [1961], pp. 194ff.), made a new generation painfully aware of the tension between biblical statements of faith and the results of objective historical criticism. The second is James Barr whose book *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961) is said to have "struck with such incisive and devastating criticism that the defenses [of biblical theology] appeared like a Maginot line facing a new form of Blitzkrieg" (p. 71).

12. Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 20. See my discussion of this problem in "The Contemporaneity of the Bible," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* LXII, 2 (1969), pp. 38ff.

In a recent article, James Barr maintains that we are facing a "new crisis of biblical authority." He points out in this connection that an ecumenical study is now under way on the issue of authority in general and of the Bible in particular. It is hard to understand why he says that "the crisis may affect the Old Testament more seriously than the New because [the Old Testament] is even more distant than the New from the decisions which have to be made today."<sup>13</sup> In what sense is the Old Testament "even more distant?" In many ways the Old Testament, with its healthy this-worldliness, its sensuous taste for the goodness of the life God has given us, its grappling with the meaning of faith in the context of the political sphere, its portrayal of the anguish of a Jeremiah in the midst of his people's suffering and tragedy, is much closer to modern man in a post-Christian age than the literature of the New Testament which is freighted with categories that are alien, or seemingly alien, to our experience.<sup>14</sup> Be that as it may, one can agree that the crisis in the authority of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is "part of a much larger scene which includes a questioning of the authority of the church, of bishops and church leaders, of professors and theological educators, and (not least) of parents and the older generation."<sup>15</sup> If this is true to our situation (and parents need no further proof!), then it is difficult to see how an appeal to the canon as a "Christian confession" is any answer to the crisis which afflicts all theology.

## II

The new crisis in theology, and particularly in biblical theology, is not confined to the American scene. It is true, of course, that biblical theology in this country has been conditioned by factors peculiar to American church history. One factor is our special Protestant history which goes back at least to the time when Harry Emerson Fosdick was regarded as the champion of biblical "modernism." Childs declares that American theologians advocated biblical theology with a special fervor because they saw in it "a chance to get beyond the frustrating Fundamentalist-Modernist deadlock," and hence they "proclaimed the dawn of a new and better day." He insists that "it was the evangelistic fervor of the American theologians to get the message to the seminaries and the churches which transformed a theological trend into a movement."<sup>16</sup> This should not be surprising, for zeal is an

13. James Barr, "The Old Testament and the New Crisis of Biblical Authority," *Interpretation* XXV (1970), pp. 24-40.

14. Cf. J. C. Beker, "Reflections on Biblical Theology," *Interpretation* XXIV (1970), p. 312.

15. *Op. cit.*, pp. 38ff.

16. *Op. cit.*, pp. 22, 27.

American characteristic, although often one would have to add the Pauline qualification (Rom. 10:2), "it is not enlightened!" There is, however, another and even more important factor which should be stressed in any historical review. I refer to the apologetic attempt to make room for Christian faith in a culture increasingly pragmatic, naturalistic, and technological. In my experience the drive behind biblical theology was not primarily an attempt to overcome the tensions between Fundamentalism and Modernism. Rather, the battle was on quite a different front: the struggle to maintain the authenticity of the biblical-Christian faith vis-à-vis another faith which, in broad terms, may be described as American pragmatism. Surprisingly, Childs makes no reference to Henry Nelson Wieman, a leading theologian during my seminary days, whose neo-naturalism was more compatible with the American temperament than the confessional theology emanating from Europe.

Perhaps an autobiographical reminiscence may be permissible at this point. I came to higher education out of the pastoral ministry. My first teaching position (Colgate University, 1946-48) did not allow me the luxury of teaching only in the Old Testament field, for which graduate work at Yale University presumably had prepared me, but thrust me into a broad teaching program in a department of philosophy and religion. At that time the department was dominated by the pragmatic, naturalistic philosophy of John Dewey which, in the previous generation, had gained wide acceptance on the American scene. Indeed, we were asked to use a text, prepared by former members of the department, which rewrote the whole history of western civilization, from Homer to the present, on the assumption that the light had dawned with "Johannine" philosophy – that is, the philosophy of John Dewey! Fortunately, our teaching was not carried on independently but in a context of weekly staff meetings and congenial fellowship, which allowed for real give and take. In that situation, those of us who represented "religion" (the Christian faith) found a tremendous ally in writings which challenged the reductionism of naturalistic philosophy and pointed to depth-dimensions of human experience which made some room for Christian faith – writings in the fields of existentialism, depth psychology, and the Israelite consciousness of history. That is why we turned to books like Paul Minear's *Eyes of Faith* with its Kierkegaardian flavor, to the early writings of G. Ernest Wright which set forth "the challenge of Israel's faith," and to some of the works of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. This was a realistic strategy to bring the biblical-Christian faith into dialogue with naturalistic philosophy, which had laid down its own canons of truth. I must admit that since that initial struggle, which was my real baptism into higher education and which brought me to a deeper understanding of the power of the Christian tradition, I have had a profound appreciation of the existential dimensions of

Scripture. Later on, in the Theological School of Drew University I found myself, therefore, in sympathy with Carl Michalson's concerns, even when there was disagreement.

My experience, I believe, helps to illustrate the peculiar American response to so-called biblical theology, which was conditioned by the prevailing philosophical (neo-naturalistic) and theological (neo-orthodox) climate. In a limited sense biblical theology was a "distinctively American" pursuit, as Childs has reminded us. On the other hand, it should be said with equal emphasis that the biblical theology of the past generation was not an exclusively American phenomenon. Indeed, it is noteworthy that during the period following World War II not a single major work in biblical theology appeared on the American scene, with the exception of Paul Minear's *Eyes of Faith* (1946), which did not enjoy wide acceptance, and G. Ernest Wright's widely influential monograph *God Who Acts* (1952), a programmatic essay which has not yet been developed into a full-scale work on biblical theology.<sup>17</sup> In this area Americans have been heavily dependent upon the leadership of biblical theologians in Europe, where biblical theology has had a long history and has weathered a number of crises.

Biblical theology was defined as an independent field of theological study as far back as the year 1787, in an inaugural address delivered by Johannes Gabler on the occasion of his installation to a professorial chair in Altdorf, Germany. In that famous address Gabler discoursed on "The Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Boundaries to be Drawn for Each."<sup>18</sup> Gabler defined biblical theology as a descriptive science which, by using an historical methodology, "transmits what the sacred writers thought about the things of God," while dogmatic theology, on the other hand, "is didactic in nature and transmits the philosophizing of a particular theologian concerning Godly things, in terms of his own mode of thinking, historical situation, place, denomination and school." Gabler maintained that biblical theology, in contrast to dogmatic theology which is "subject to transmutation," "always remains the same" in spite of variations in scholarly interpretation. Unfortunately, Gabler's claim for the constancy of biblical theology, when separated from dogmatic theology, was not realized.

17. G. Ernest Wright's recent book, *The Old Testament and Theology* (Harper and Row, 1969) resumes in lecture form the discussion initiated in his seminal work, *God, Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SCM Press, 1952; 7th impression, 1964). While admitting to exaggerations in his earlier work, Wright still maintains the same essential theological view in his latest work. *The Old Testament and Theology* does not pretend to set forth the outline of a full-scale Old Testament theology. Wright has indicated the contours of his proposed Old Testament theology in "Reflections Concerning Old Testament Theology," *Studia Biblica et Semitica Theodoro Christiano Vriezen Dedicata* (H. Veenman en Zonen, 1966), pp. 376-388.

18. Translation from the Latin by Karlfried Froehlich, Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary.



Beginning with Gabler himself (a rationalist), biblical theology increasingly came under the influence of modern philosophies: the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Kantian and Hegelian philosophy, and the evolutionary view which was favored by the Wellhausen school.<sup>19</sup> By the early twentieth century, biblical theology of the Old Testament had practically succumbed to the triumphant *Religionsgeschichte* which spawned numerous books on "the history of the religion of Israel." It was only in the late 1920's that there was in Europe a revival of biblical theology, evidenced preeminently by the publication of Walther Eichrodt's monumental *Theology of the Old Testament*.<sup>20</sup>

It is not my intention to discuss here the developments in the New Testament field since World War II, except to note that hermeneutical questions have monopolized attention and the relation of the New Testament to the Old has been largely ignored.<sup>21</sup> In the Old Testament field, on the other hand, theologians have struggled valiantly to grasp the unity of the Bible, and specifically the relationship between the Testaments. Walther Eichrodt found the unity of the Old Testament in the motif of the covenant, that is, the ongoing relationship between God and people which moves toward the Kingdom of God manifested, in the fulness of time, in Jesus Christ. His method was to take a transverse cut (*Querschnitt*) through the dynamic movement of God's purpose so as to display the structural unity and essential integrity of Israel's faith over against the religions of antiquity. His approach was theologically reflective in that he sought for what remains constant and normative in the dynamic, historical movement of Israel's history. Gerhard von Rad, on the other hand, rejecting Eichrodt's emphasis upon the structural elements implied in Israel's traditions, maintained that Israel took as her starting point "the absolute priority in theology of event over 'logos'."<sup>22</sup>

19. The evolutionary historicism of the Wellhausen school was popularized in Harry Emerson Fosdick's *Guide to the Understanding of the Bible* (1938), a widely influential book in the 40's. A major event in my career was the reading of Walther Eichrodt's critical review, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65 (1946), pp. 205-217 (with an English abstract by W. F. Albright). Though appreciative of Fosdick's synthesis, Eichrodt wrote: "In [this] book, the author has, to speak candidly, written the obituary of a whole scholarly approach and method of investigation, making both their inherent merits and their limitations clear to the thoughtful student" (p. 205).
20. Eichrodt's work, which appeared in German during the years 1933-39, has been translated by J. A. Baker, *Theology of the Old Testament*, I and II (Westminster Press, 1961 and 1967). For a brief historical summary of the period, see Robert C. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (Yale University Press, 2nd edition, 1963), chapters 5-7.
21. See Rudolph Bultmann's article, "The Significance of the Old Testament for Christian Faith," the lead essay in the symposium *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. by B. W. Anderson (Harper and Row, 1963; Herder and Herder, 1969). To this symposium Carl Michalson contributed an article on "Bultmann against Marcion," pp. 49-63.
22. Von Rad's work, which appeared in German during the years 1957-60, has been translated by D. M. G. Stalker, *Old Testament Theology*, I and II (Harper and Row, 1962 and 1965). The quotation is found in Vol. I, p. 116.

Accordingly, he presented Old Testament theology as a *Heilsgeschichte* (or, more properly, a history of traditions), in which the saving events of the past were retold and reinterpreted at each new juncture as Israel was driven forward, under Yahweh's initiative, toward the promised future. Von Rad maintained that the Old Testament, taken by itself, has no center which remains constant in the process of the transmission of traditions. Rather, its disconnected reinterpretations of traditions lean forward to the New Testament where the focal point is God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Apart from the center of the whole biblical tradition in Jesus Christ, he maintains, the Old Testament would belong only in the field of the history of Israel's religion.<sup>23</sup>

Here are two radically different, and seemingly mutually exclusive, ways of dealing with biblical theology. One of the symptoms of the current dilemma, at least in the Old Testament field, is that these alternatives appear to have led to an impasse. Indeed, European theology of the Old Testament is in a state of crisis, too. In 1965 the distinguished French theologian, Edmond Jacob, himself the author of an important work on Old Testament theology, began his Franz Delitzsch lectures on "Basic Questions of Old Testament Theology" by announcing that the Golden Age of Old Testament theology (referring to the period since 1930) is over. We now stand at a turning point, he declared, when it must be decided whether to go beyond the monumental but opposing achievements of Eichrodt and von Rad into a comprehensive theology of the Old and New Testaments, or whether to retreat into the analysis of the separate parts and to a discussion of methodology and exegetical details.<sup>24</sup>

### III

Thus the crisis in biblical theology, which we experience in a peculiar manner in the context of our American history, is part of a much larger theological crisis. The crisis is resolved too easily, in my judgment, by emphasizing "the role of the canon in creating and maintaining the unity of the Bible."<sup>25</sup> Surely it is theologically important to consider "the canon as theological problem,"<sup>26</sup> for the canon of scripture and the community of faith are inseparable. Part of the interpretive task is to understand the way biblical texts have functioned in the community that preserved and transmitted them. It is true, too, that the Old Testament and the

23. Von Rad, *Theology* II, pp. 428ff.

24. Edmond Jacob, *Grundfragen alttestamentlicher Theologie* (Kohlhammer Verlag, 1970). See also his essay, "La Théologie de l'Ancien Testament: État présent et perspectives d'avenir," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 44 (1968), pp. 420-32, where he suggests that the Golden Age of Old Testament Theology may lie in the future.

25. Brevard Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

26. G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology*, chap. 7.

New Testament stand in a complementary or dialectical relationship, each interpreting the other, so that it is possible to envision a biblical theology of the whole Bible. But to say that the canon is the guarantor of the unity of the Bible, in the face of the manifold diversities with which biblical theologians have been wrestling, is only to restate the problem of the Bible in the modern world. For one thing, this proposal raises the question of the nature of the church and the magisterium, if any, which speaks on its behalf.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the proposal seems to short-circuit the hermeneutical question of how the Bible functions normatively in relation to modern experience, that is, how the distance between the text and the interpreter is bridged so that scripture becomes Word of God. It is this question to which biblical theologians have been addressing themselves in recent years, particularly those in the New Testament field.

Quite apart from the questions of the boundary and normativeness of the canon, there is a deeply rooted pluralism in scripture which cannot be comprehended within any conceptual scheme. This is part of the current dilemma. The search for the "unity of the Bible," which apparently motivated much of the biblical theology of the past generation, has not attained its goal. Perhaps some of us welcomed this search in reaction to the relativism of volumes on "the religions of Israel" or "the religions of the New Testament." We have discovered, however, that even when the interpreter moves from "religion" to "theology" — that is, from the 1920's to the 1930's — the diversities of the scriptural tradition have reasserted themselves in honest study. In the field of Old Testament theology there have been all sorts of attempts to find a single formula which embraces the variety of the biblical materials: the covenant, the holiness of God, the Lordship of Yahweh, the recital of the mighty acts of God, the Kingdom of God, the Knowledge of God — to mention only a few; but none of these has been able to carry the full weight of Old Testament theology. Therefore, from within the biblical tradition it is an almost hopeless dream for a revival of biblical theology to provide a unity which could reshape theology as a whole.

27. One of my graduate students, who stands in the Roman Catholic tradition, puts the question in these words: "The difficulty with Childs' thesis is that his use of the word 'Church,' his proposed context, is very ambiguous. Nowhere does he define the term, and we are left to wonder which contemporary branch of the Christian Church he is referring to, since it is clear that all are not one. Nor does Childs explain how the 'Church' exercises its normativeness through its constituency. By the same token, who constitutes the 'Church' and speaks authoritatively for it?" See Gilbert Romero, "Problems and Perspectives of Old Testament Theology," Princeton Theological Seminary, 1971. See also the essay on "Canonicity" by James C. Turro and Raymond E. Brown in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 516, where "the internal cohesion" of the canon of Scripture is traced to "use by a community guided by the Holy Spirit." "Books not conforming to this internal cohesion fall, by that very fact, outside the pale of the canon. The faculty for judging such conformity or nonconformity resides in the Church. Acknowledgment from any other quarter would be what Zwingli feared, namely, a human seal of approval set upon the work of God."

Fr. Roland Murphy at one point has suggested that perhaps the phrase "the unity of the Bible" should be "interred" and has called attention to explorations in "pluralism in theology" by Roman Catholic theologians.<sup>28</sup> It must be admitted that the pluralism of scripture provides the opportunity for the Bible to speak to men in new ways. In an illuminating essay Walter Brueggemann has objected to the church's "triumphalistic tendency" to exalt certain portions of scripture (thereby establishing a canon within the canon) and has called attention to neglected areas of the Bible, such as royal theology or wisdom literature, which may speak effectively to modern experience.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, the inability of biblical theologians to grasp and define the unity of the Bible does not mean, in my judgment, that we have to fall back into the fragmentary or atomistic view of "varieties of religion in the Old Testament" or "varieties of religion in the New Testament" which preceded the renaissance of biblical theology. Nor does it mean that we must abandon the discipline of biblical theology (or, in the case at hand, of biblical theology of the Old Testament) and speak of biblical theologies or Old Testament theologies in the plural. It is appropriate, of course, to speak of the theology of Second Isaiah or the theology of the Deuteronomistic History, and no one would suppose that these can be synthesized. The same holds true in the New Testament where we find, for instance, the different theological viewpoints of Paul and James. It is all too easy to point this out, however, and those who labor this point, I fear, fail to grapple with the theological problem of the integrity of the Bible, at its deepest level. The scriptures which constitute the Bible, Old and New Testaments, are not separate and unrelated items which have been arbitrarily brought together to form a miscellaneous collection or a sacred library. Somehow these scriptures hang together; they cohere. And this belonging-together, this scriptural concert is acknowledged and actualized in the worshipping community, when the Bible is read and interpreted and when the scriptural story is rehearsed and relived in the sacred seasons of the year.

So, despite the theological changes of the past quarter of a century, the question still remains: what is it that holds the Bible together? It is not just the canon as "a confession of faith." "The life and the survival of the people of God," Edmond Jacob rightly observes, "is not limited to and is not identical with a literature, even if that literature be a canon."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the canon is

28. Roland Murphy, "The Role of the Bible in Roman Catholic Theology," *Interpretation* XXV (1971), p. 86; see also his "Christian Understanding of the Old Testament," *Theology Digest* 18 (1970), pp. 321-332, especially p. 327.

29. Walter Brueggemann, "The Triumphalistic Tendency in Exegetical History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38 (1970), pp. 367-80.

30. "La Théologie de l'Ancien Testament: État présent et perspectives d'avenir," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 44 (1968), pp. 420-432. He insists on the importance of intertestamental literature, the so-called apocrypha and pseudepigrapha.

not properly an object of faith. "The canon is not the word of God *tout* simple," Ernst Käsemann points out. "It can only become and be the Word of God so long as we do not seek to imprison God within it; for this would be to make it a substitute for the God who addresses us and makes claims upon us."<sup>31</sup> Having heard these warnings against biblicism, however, the question persists: what is it that makes the writings of the Bible cohere?

#### IV

Since confession is good for the soul, I may as well state — speaking as one biblical theologian — that I have no facile answer to give to this fundamental question. What follows is only a preliminary venture. Let me begin with a statement about the nature of faith, made by the New Testament theologian, Ernst Käsemann, to whom I have just referred. In the context of his discussion of the canon of the New Testament, Käsemann refers to "the great cloud of witnesses," the roll call of the heroes and heroines of faith (Hebrews 11), and observes: "Faith always stands in the continuity of divine action and only sectarianism seeks to detach itself from this history." This *continuity of God's action with his people*, however, is not easily grasped; for "it is necessary to distinguish between the continuity of the divine action and that of human tradition, even though it is Church tradition."<sup>32</sup> The distinction between the ungraspable continuity of God's action with his people and the diversity and relativity of human tradition could lead, as it does in the case of Käsemann, to an emphasis upon the disunity of the church, and hence to a search for a canon within the canon, that is, "a hermeneutical center" (which for Käsemann is "justification by faith"). The same distinction, however, could lead, as it does in the case of Eric Voegelin, to an appreciation of Paul's theology of history expressed in his Epistle to the Romans, chapters 9-11.<sup>33</sup> In this great passage Paul is overwhelmed by the "mystery" of history (Rom. 11:25) whose meaning, partially revealed, is finally lost to human comprehension. What awes him, however, is not a vision of the "structure of history" which man can grasp or some positive historical pattern which lies behind the tradition (e.g., *Heilsgeschichte*), but the wonderful constancy of God's faithfulness to his people Israel and the amazing freedom of his grace. At the end of his anguished struggle with the problem of the church existing vis-à-vis the

31. Ernst Käsemann, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SCM Press, 1964), pp. 105f.

32. *Op. cit.*, pp. 105ff.

33. Eric Voegelin, "History and Gnosis," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. by B. W. Anderson (Herder and Herder, 1969), pp. 64-89. See my extended review of Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation*, "Politics and the Transcendent," *The Political Science Reviewer* 1 (1971), pp. 1-29.

Israelite community, both sharing the same scriptural heritage and both belonging to God's elect people, he finally breaks out into a doxology to the God whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33-36). According to this passage, there is a People of God, composed of those whom God has graciously chosen, which lives to bear witness to the incomprehensible continuity of God's action in their history, and to his faithfulness which underlies the whole creation.

If we start from this point, biblical theology must take seriously the co-existence of the Jewish and Christian communities, both of which belong together in God's historical purpose. It is not proper for expositions of Old Testament theology (as in the case of von Rad's *Theology*) to glide silently over post-Exilic Judaism and to ignore the theological importance of the interaction between the early Christian and Jewish communities.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, it is not proper for the Christian church to make a monopolistic claim upon the Old Testament by "Christianizing" it in one way or another. The Old Testament, because of what it is *in itself*, provides the theology in terms of which men respond to the crisis of God's new manifestation in Jesus Christ. This is consistent with the classical doctrine of the Trinity which does not permit theology to be collapsed into christology.<sup>35</sup>

The doxological conclusion of Paul's discussion in Romans 9-11 should make us aware of another point: the continuity of God's action with his people (that is, the unity of the Bible at its deepest level) is affirmed in worship. If biblical theology is conceived to be theology which arises out of the subject matter of the Bible, that is, a theology *of* the Old Testament or the New Testament (taking "of" as subjective genitive) and not a theology *about* the Testaments, then it belongs essentially within the context of worship. It is striking to discover how much of scripture is related, directly or indirectly, to the People of God conceived as a worshipping community. In the Bible we do not deal with static doctrines, timeless ideals, eternal principles or other bloodless

34. This point is made forcefully by James Barr, "Le Judaïsme postbiblique et la théologie de l'Ancien Testament," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* Ser. 3, 18 (1968), pp. 209-17.

35. See the comment of Walther Eichrodt in his essay, *Worin gründet die unzerreissbare Einheit von Altem und Neuem Testament?* (Heinrich Majer Verlag, 1939). In the last analysis, he says, the indissoluble unity of the Testaments is based on the fact that the Old Testament bears witness "to the Father of Jesus Christ who intends to lead to his Son through the Holy Spirit, while the New Testament shows us this Son in his full glory. In this one simple sentence we find, expressed quite clearly, the indispensable character of the Old Testament and its inseparable relationship with the New. For how can one understand the Son if he does not know the Father, and how can one come to the Son if he is contemptuous of the way the Father leads, while the Son himself testifies that no one can come to the Father except the Father leads him?" (p. 15). In this connection see the strictures of G. Ernest Wright against "Christomonism" (*The Old Testament and Theology*, chap. 1) and his reference to H. Richard Niebuhr's work, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960).

abstractions but with a *people* whose vocation is to serve God in a liturgy which cannot be confined to the temple. This is clearly true of the people of God whose life story is portrayed in the Old Testament. "Taken at one level," writes James A. Wharton, "the Old Testament can be viewed as the millennium long attempt of a people to worship truly the Holy Lord in its midst and to bring forth a pattern of behavior absolutely pleasing to him."<sup>36</sup> It was the worshipful awareness of the actuality of Yahweh in the world and the continuity of his action in history which made Israel's story such an unusual drama, one which even yet has the power to involve us. Even when the continuity of God's purpose was eclipsed from human understanding, as in psalms of lament (e.g., Ps. 22: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"), the faith of Israel produced doxologies to his faithfulness (*hesed*) which embraces the inception and goal of Israel's historical pilgrimage and, indeed, the beginning and the consummation of his whole creation.

It may be, as Gerhard von Rad has said, that in the Old Testament event has priority over *logos*. That is an incisive way to stress the dynamic, dramatic character of the continuity of God's action with his people. The Old Testament is the story of a pilgrim people "on the way" — unable to find an abiding resting place but ever driven forward into new starts, fresh appropriations of the tradition, new exoduses from the past. But *logos* — or at least, theological reflection — has its proper and essential place within the worshipping community. If the priestly story of creation found in Genesis 1:1-2:4a once had its setting in worship, as its liturgical style suggests, we cannot overlook the fact that in its present form it is the product of a theologian who has reflected deeply upon God's creation and man's place in it. If Deuteronomy reflects ceremonies of covenant-renewal, when Israel affirmed the contemporaneity of the covenant relation with Yahweh (as in Deut. 5:2-3: "Yahweh our God made a covenant with *us* . . ."), it is also true that the Deuteronomist was a theologian who sought to understand the continuity of God's action with his people. And if "the fear of *Yahweh* is the beginning of wisdom," with the result that wisdom occupies an important place in Israel's psalms (Pss. 37, 49, 73), it is also true that the Old Testament contains the Book of Job, in which theological reflection presses to the very limits of thought. It is within the worshipping community that theological reflection is rooted.

If this is true, the crisis in biblical theology is more serious than any diagnosis given thus far. Worship is a problem for modern man. Too often "worship services" are sterile. The forms seem to be lacking in content; the language of tradition fails to strike fire

36. James A. Wharton, "Obedience and Sacrifice," *Austin Seminary Bulletin* LXXXV (Nov. 1969), p. 16.

in contemporary experience; and the sermon, which is all too central in Protestant services, is usually a sign of "the famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). While the problem of worship in the modern world affects all branches of theology, the impact upon biblical theology is particularly severe. If the origin of theological reflection is within the worshipping community, as is clearly the case in the Bible, then it is hard to see how the theological task can be performed without a recovery of this operative context. Biblical theology is not a mere academic study which describes what the Bible once *meant* and surrenders to systematic and practical theologians the task of understanding what the Bible *means*. Rather, the biblical theologian stands as a committed person within the community whose "knowledge of God" is rooted in worship and, from that standpoint, his task is to explicate the structure of biblical faith.<sup>37</sup>

It may well be, then, that the renaissance of biblical theology is dependent upon the renewal of worship. Worship is a corporate act in which the people share a common story ("myth") and participate in a common symbolization. In my judgment, biblical theologians of the past have not been wrong in saying that the Bible bears witness to "a single drama of divine and human action," as H. Richard Niebuhr once put it.<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that the Bible sets forth some historical scheme or dispensational structure. Rather, the metaphor of the drama — "the unfolding drama of the Bible," as I have called it elsewhere — does justice to what happens when the scriptural tradition is heard and appropriated with personal involvement within the worshipping community. I am particularly impressed by Amos Wilder's discussion in his little book, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel*, where, in connection with the parables and stories of the New Testament, he observes that "the narrative mode is uniquely important to Christianity," unlike other religions and philosophies in which the telling of a story is peripheral.

It is through the Christian story that God speaks, and all heaven and earth come into it. God is an active and purposeful God and his action with and for men has a beginning, a middle, and an end like any good story.

Wilder goes on to say that in the Christian history there are many episodes involving minor characters, such as the maid in the

37. While this is not the place to develop the contours of an Old Testament theology, the exposition should include, I believe, the following: 1) The revelation of the name of God to his people and his commitment to go with them into the future; 2) major paradigms for the expression of Yahweh's *hesed*: a) the conditional Mosaic covenant, b) the unconditional Davidic [Abrahamic] covenant, 3) the hiddenness of God and the trials of Israel's faith.

38. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Macmillan, 1960), pp. 135f.



courtyard of the high priest or Simon of Cyrene who bore the cross of Jesus. Yet these minor anecdotes make the Christian story the kind of story with which we may identify, rather than permitting us to stand at a distance.

The anecdotes about each such individual and many more have their significance in the fact that they are related to the total world-story from alpha to omega . . . . Perhaps the special character of the stories of the New Testament lies in the fact that they are not told for themselves, that they are not only about other people, but they are always about us. They locate us in the very midst of the great story and plot of all time and space, and therefore relate us to the great dramatist and storyteller, God himself.<sup>39</sup>

What Wilder has said about the self-involving power of biblical language is true of the Bible as a whole. With all its diversity the Bible portrays a single story: the story of God's people, a worshipping community, on its God-directed way. It is a story which, in a profound sense, is our story, with all its greatness and tragedy, its hope and its anguish, its natural setting on the good earth and in the marvellous cosmos. It is a story, however, which prompts a doxological awareness of God's involvement in the historicity of our existence and the mystery of his faithfulness which embraces the whole creation, from beginning to end. The Bible belongs in a community where men hear the Word of God spoken in human words and who know, through the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, that this is "truth-for-us" or "saving truth."<sup>40</sup> It is within this community that our theological thinking begins, whether in the field of biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, or pastoral theology.

39. Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* (Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 56,57. Also found in an earlier edition under the title *The Language of the Gospel* (Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 64,65.

40. See G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (Harper and Row, 1969): "The Church has never meant that revelation simply means Scripture. It is rather a Scripture which becomes our history, read in a community in which men listen for the Word of God when it is read. Its truth is truth-for-us, or saving truth, heard by a community exhibiting a common trust in the Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, which alone can confirm it" (p. 184).

# The Future of New Testament Theology

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New Testament Theology as a scholarly discipline has the task of analyzing the texts of primitive Christianity historically and philologically, without degrading them to mere curiosities of the past. Put positively, the task of New Testament Theology is to hear these texts in such a way as to bring to expression their valid content so that it emerges as a serious alternative for modern times, capable of being decided for or against, without being falsified in this process of translation into modern alternatives.

The discipline of New Testament Theology had its point of departure in Dogmatics, as the canonical grounding for doctrine; ultimately it moved into the discipline of the History of Religions, as the analysis of the objectifications of primitive Christianity's experiences. This trajectory of the discipline from the eighteenth century's Dogmatics to the History of Religions at the turn of our century poses the question whether the discipline has not thus been placed in its historical period and thereby assigned permanently to the past. Either the survival of the discipline in the twentieth century is to be dismissed as an inconsistency, in the sense that things finally transcended often drag on half alive until, with growing historical distance, their impossibility as such reaches general consciousness. Or the continuation of the discipline down to our time can be taken seriously as a yet-to-be-explained pointer to the fact that the discipline has a future even after the end of the epoch to which it organically belonged, of course in some form suitable to the new epoch and hence after undergoing translation or transformation.

Of course our time can also be interpreted without assuming such a basic break with the past, in which case the problem of this paper would be less acute. But rather than entering into a further discussion of alternate assessments of modern times, the paper presupposes for the sake of the argument such a decisive break, so as to be able to investigate the future of New Testament Theology under those conditions. Such an investigation will then in retrospect influence the question of periodizing, for the recognition that there has been such a break is impeded in part because one does not know how our work could continue if one conceded the extent of the cultural break.

## I

Some seventy-five years ago New Testament Theology was brought to its end by the brilliant criticism contained in William Wrede's booklet "On the Task and Method of So-called New Testament Theology" (1897).<sup>1</sup> Wrede's thesis carried the day precisely because he confronted the masterpiece, unsurpassed up to that time in history of the discipline, of Heinrich Julius Holtzmann's two-volume "Textbook of New Testament Theology" (1896-7).<sup>2</sup> Wrede came to grips with the discipline in terms of its best exponent, and yet succeeded in exposing its basic flaws. Major works of New Testament scholarship in the next generation were not called "Theology of the New Testament" (although the title did enjoy an afterlife in lesser works down to our own times). Instead, leading works were given such titles as "The Messianic Secret in the Gospels" (William Wrede, 1901),<sup>3</sup> "*Kyrios Christos*" (Wilhelm Bousset, 1913), "Primitive Christianity" (Johannes Weiss, 1914-17).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed Wrede's main arguments are still convincing today: The discipline "Biblical Theology" modernizes and harmonizes arbitrarily, since it has not yet fully outgrown its point of departure as the supplier of proof texts for Dogmatics. The concept "*New Testament Theology*" is misleading, since the subsequent canonizing process, when viewed historically, made arbitrary selections and split up an historical whole anachronistically into canonical and apocryphal camps. The subject matter of what had been called *New Testament Theology* should actually be called the study of *primitive Christianity*. To a considerable extent the subject matter is actually not its *theology*. For doctrinal formulations in the specific sense of the term are rare in the New Testament, which in many of its books hardly presents more than raw material for a general description of average primitive Christian religious experience. All this leads to Wrede's thesis that New Testament Theology as a discipline should be replaced by the History of Primitive Christian Religion.

One should not say, in view of Rudolf Bultmann's masterful *Theology of the New Testament*,<sup>5</sup> that this epochal significance attributed to Wrede's criticism has been refuted by history itself. The

1. *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten neutestamentlichen Theologie*.
2. *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie*.
3. *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*. English translation *The Messianic Secret* 1971 (appeared 1972).
4. *Das Urchristentum*. English translation, *The History of Primitive Christianity*, 1937, reprinted as *Earliest Christianity: A History of the Period A.D. 30-150*, 1959.
5. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1948-1953. English Translation *Theology of the New Testament*, 1951-1955. Since the English edition was published in two volumes, the arrangement of the one-volume German original was obscured. The German edition has as part two "*Die Theologie des Paulus und des Johannes*," which the English edition separates into two parts so as to defer Johannine theology to the second volume. Hence what is in German the third part becomes in the English edition part four.

reverse is more nearly the case. What Wrede had in mind as a replacement for New Testament Theology is carried out in the first and third major parts of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*, sections on "Presuppositions and Motifs of New Testament Theology," and "The Development Toward the Ancient Church" — neither of which presents normative theology or even theology given profile by a theologian's individuality, but at most the early congregation's theology, i.e., objectifications of the religious history of one Hellenistic religion among others. It is no coincidence that neither of these parts is entitled "Theology."

To be sure the second and central section is unmistakably designated "The Theology of Paul and John." Thus when it comes to the "canon in the canon" the venerable title Theology recurs. But how is it meant? Materially speaking, Bultmann considers religious expressions to be objectifications, to be sure less objectifications of religious experience than of one's understanding of existence, but nonetheless objectifications. By de-objectifying theologoumena to their eschatological self-understanding (in the case of Paul) or their unworldly self-understanding (in the case of John), one strikes upon the material convergence of stance that one can hold to be binding. Thus this second section of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* meets the two conditions, the historical as well as the material condition, that belong to the essence of New Testament Theology as a discipline.

Although this existentialistic interpretation was worked out on the model of mythical language, Bultmann, at least in principle, advocated this approach for all theological language. This applies specifically to the concept of God, i.e., theology in the narrower sense. Since statements about God and man are never intended in isolation, but always imply the other, both series of statements can be reduced to a common denominator, i.e., they can be brought to expression in one unified terminology. This methodology could, at least in theory, lead to a theological orientation as readily as to an anthropological orientation. Yet Bultmann chose the latter without seriously discussing the former. He states without further ado: "Therefore, Paul's theology can best be treated as his doctrine of man" (I, 191). Thus it is not theology in the narrower sense of a doctrine of God, but rather anthropology (as Herbert Braun has particularly emphasized) that became the centre of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*. It was still called Theology probably because the whole Dialectic Theology movement, in its repudiation of liberalism, had made the terminological shift from "Science of Religion" back to "Theology." If it were not for the trend in the theology of the day, Bultmann could well have continued the shift by the History-of-Religions School from "New Testament Theology" to the "History of Primitive Christian Religion;" without terminological difficulty he could have taken the next step — the presentation of the self-understanding of the main spokesmen of the eschato-

logical congregation. Without changing materially the content of the history of research, that history of research could have been described to the effect that New Testament Theology has not been carried on in the major leagues since the turn of the century. Rather the concern of the former discipline, namely to bring historical material to expression as a binding possibility, came to expression in another way than in a New Testament Theology, e.g., by means of demythologizing and existentialistic interpretation.

The progress achieved in Bultmann's reworking of Wrede's position is most readily discernible when one compares it with other New Testament Theologies that were options during Bultmann's time. One immediately thinks of such alternatives as "realized eschatology" (C. H. Dodd) and "*Heilsgeschichte*" (Oscar Cullmann). Here, as in the case of Bultmann, our interest is not in debatable exegetical detail, though both positions have been validly contested on that level. But the current questionability of New Testament Theology consists less in whether the New Testament or primitive Christianity can be historically investigated, than in whether it can be understood theologically, i.e., as laying a claim on us today.

One only need recall the shifting history of the concept of "realized eschatology" to realize that, materially speaking, nothing was actually understood under that term; it only reported as best it could what people once thought. The term's point of departure was Albert Schweitzer's (apocalypticism), which in all consistency should lead one to give it up as not fulfilled and as intellectually unreproducible by modern people ("thoroughgoing eschatology"). Rudolf Otto provided the swing of the pendulum in his work on "The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man" (1934), which argued that the kingdom of God had "already dawned" ("Schonanbruch").<sup>6</sup> He was able to interpret apocalypticism, in terms of his Schleiermacherian philosophy of religion, as an intuition of the holy. Dodd then proceeded to eliminate the futuristic statements about the kingdom of God by interpreting them in a philologically questionable way as already fulfilled ("realized") in the present. Thereupon Ernst Haenchen (in a letter of June 20, 1944 to Joachim Jeremias) sought to help Dodd out by proposing an improved German re-translation, "eschatology in the process of realization" ("sich realisierende Eschatologie"). Dodd took up that lead.<sup>7</sup>

But what is gained with such playing with terms? No more than a few tactical advantages: The unity of the New Testament, which would be threatened if Jesus awaited the shift of aeons in the future but Paul located it in the past, seems to have been saved. The ideological offense to the Christian people that resided in the imminent expectation, the non-fulfillment of that expectation, the fantastic-

6. *Gottesreich und Menschensohn*, 1934. English translation *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, 1938.

7. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 1953, p. 447, note 1.

ness of apocalypticism in general, was removed. Existential risk was also removed, i.e., such risk as that inherent in Loisy's formulation that Jesus promised God's reign but all we got was the church. In spite of Kierkegaard, Dodd seeks exegetically to vindicate Christendom as the establishment to rule the world (of course as the kingdom of God).

Yet when one abstracts from such tactical advantages and asks materially how one could understand this terminological development as the basis for a binding alternative today, one scarcely finds an answer. An imminent expectation can no longer be fulfilled, since our time is no longer near to that time. But all other modifications of the time pattern are equally unfulfillable. Anyone who would try to claim that God's reign has already come, i.e., that our world is the kingdom of God, deserves to be laughed or cried down. But he who seeks a position between those extremes, e.g., by saying the forgiveness of sins or the mighty acts of Jesus are the first signs of the fulfillment that will all the more certainly soon occur, is also refuted by the non-fulfillment of the consummation. For a thinking person today, all temporal alternatives are equally invalid.

Bultmann elevated this whole discussion to the level of conceivable theology in the sense of what can be seriously discussed as a live option, when he observed that Jesus ignores time.<sup>8</sup> By this he did not mean that Jesus did not share the temporal categories of Jewish apocalypticism, but only that when Jesus made use of such mythologoumena it was to bring something more substantive to expression. Only then is the dusty dealing in antiquities transcended and the level of genuine theology attained.

The situation was similar in the case of "*Heilsgeschichte*." It wanted to build on facts. Christian faith is not oriented to mental systems but to God's action in history. From the Old Testament "*Credo*" via pre-Pauline confessions such as 1 Cor. 15:3-5 on to the Apostles' Creed, one believed in history. But Gerhard von Rad's *Credo* and Martin Noth's *History of Israel*<sup>9</sup> do not coincide, any more than do the Apostles' Creed and the Quest of the Historical Jesus. Even the most recent effort by Wolfhart Pannenberg to play off the history of the revelation of God against the Bultmannian dissolution of history into kerygma and into the historicity of existence ends only in the history of traditions, i.e., again in the history of *ideas* about history. Since such a *Heilsgeschichte* or History of Revelation, though classified as statements about historical facts, cannot possibly consist primarily of factual statements, this approach can hardly make a serious claim except among those who still think uncritically and biblicistically. Among its more penetrating advocates

8. Formulated in the discussion of Hans Conzelmann's lecture at the meeting of Old Marburgers in Gugenheim 22 October 1957 on "Gegenwart und Zukunft in der synoptischen Tradition" quoted in ZThK 54 (1957), 288, note 2. English translation "Present and Future in the Synoptic Tradition," JThC 5, (1968) 26-44.

9. *Geschichte Israels*, 1950. English translation *History of Israel*.

this approach serves rather as the point of departure for the history of the Philosophy of History, reaching from Augustine to Arnold Toynbee and Teilhard de Chardin. But when the Bible is classified as the first phase of such a development, its statements are nonetheless devalued for us, since the accuracy of their content is quietly surrendered. As a matter of fact, the biblical language of *Heilsgeschichte* is impossible in the modern period whenever it is listened to in terms of the accuracy of the assertions it makes. Only when one asks what this language in given situations achieves can one be seriously involved in it. Thus, rather than *Heilsgeschichte* or the History of Revelation being a clear alternative to Bultmann's Kerygmatic theology, *Heilsgeschichte* itself is defensible only when its assertions are no longer understood in terms of their value as statements of fact, but rather in terms of the history of traditions, in terms of the event triggered by their language, i.e., kerygmatically.

The result of this critical survey of the outstanding alternatives to Bultmann in terms of New Testament Theology is that they *intend* to carry on New Testament Theology, but in actuality only *attain* to the status of an antique shop, without even being clear about what has happened to them.

Bultmann's faithful followers seem themselves to be heading in the same direction, an odd trait that documents again how much the time of New Testament Theology as a scholarly discipline is past. Unfortunately this is the significance for the history of the discipline that resides in Hans Conzelmann's *Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*,<sup>10</sup> even though Conzelmann represents the middle of the Bultmannian school. Conzelmann senses in the mood of the times "a new tendency toward historical positivism and relativism. The upward trend in which biblical scholarship delighted for decades itself proved to be a piece of escapism — into the historical . . . . The retreat into historical investigation is paralleled by a remarkable tendency to take over the statements of the New Testament directly, as teaching for today."<sup>11</sup>

In order to counter all that, Conzelmann chooses a tactic that he regards as opposed to that of Bultmann. If Bultmann emphasized interpretation, Conzelmann proposes to put in the foreground "historical reconstruction, i.e. the presentation of the thought-world of the New Testament as conditioned by its time."<sup>12</sup> This tactic takes its toll on Conzelmann's own presentation, in that the grasp of the problematic in the individual sections shrivels markedly, as compared with Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*, due to the fact that the horizon of the inquiry has been so sharply reduced. Furthermore it is difficult to see how such an emphasis can prevent

10. *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1967. English translation *An Outline of Theology of the New Testament*, 1969.

11. *Outline*, pp. xiii-xiv.

12. *Outline*, p. xiv.

flight into the historical — rather his approach itself seems to be a retreat into history, at least when measured by Bultmann's *Theology*.

Conzelmann assumes that limiting the task to the presentation of the New Testament's world of thought in its temporally conditioned form can guard the reader from taking over the assertions of the New Testament directly as doctrine for today. But this is a quite unfounded assumption. Even though Conzelmann points out the history-of-religions context more strongly than was customary, e.g., for Dodd and Cullmann, still he does not in this regard excel Bultmann. Actually it is more difficult to take over the assertions of the New Testament directly as doctrine for today on the basis of Bultmann's *Theology*. For Bultmann pointed out their temporal conditionedness by accentuating the mythological element that cannot be reproduced by us today. When Bultmann takes as his point of departure doctrines present in the New Testament and uses their literal impossibility as an incentive for interpretation, he thus excludes literalism. Is not such a back-sliding into literalism more likely on the basis of Conzelmann's presentation, since the biblicist is here misled to assume that he can in his own theologizing simply reproduce the historical reconstruction, whose impossibility and resultant need for translation are not pointed out by Conzelmann in confrontation with the modern mind?

Already Cullmann had boasted, over against the Bultmannians, of just such a purely historical objectivity; but it was precisely here that Krister Stendahl protested: "Cullmann (and Stauffer) have not clarified their answer to why or how they consider the NT as meaningful for the present age. Because of this lack of clarification, their works are read by many — perhaps most — readers as being on the same level of present meaning as Bultmann's and Barth's highly 'translated' interpretations; and there are indications that they do not mind such a use of their work."<sup>13</sup> Conzelmann would not be content with such an outcome; yet why should he count on better readers?

The danger that threatens Conzelmann most seriously seems to have escaped his attention: "If experience and the spirit of the age are to be the controlling factors in theology, then theological work is on the way out."<sup>14</sup> This scornful caricature is called forth not only by fadism and dilettantism, as he seems to think, but is his confused hearing of the distant rumbling of the incipient revolution. The inevitable result of Conzelmann's flight into the historical, which he concedes to be characteristic of biblical scholarship of recent years, was a decided turn by students to the claims of life itself upon us, the claims to which, according to Bultmann (but not according to Conzelmann), New Testament Theology is supposed to direct us. "*Après nous le déluge!*" Conzelmann published his theology in 1967; in 1968 came the revolt of the students that among other things

13. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962, I, 421.

14. *Outline*, p. xiv.



transformed the high standing of exegesis with one fell swoop into its very opposite. Since the authority of Holy Scripture is no longer presupposed, why should one "dust off such collections of curiosities?" Is one not thereby "distracted from the burning tasks of the day?" To such questions Conzelmann seems to have no answer.

He would need no such answer, if he were only ready to concede that his book offered no more than what Wrede would call a "History of Primitive Christian Religion." Thus we would in fact be confronted with a first serious solution to the question as to the future of New Testament Theology: After many detours and evasions we should simply concede Wrede to have been right and hence deny any future of New Testament Theology; we should surrender any pretense to be presenting anything that can lay a claim on modern times and instead should channel New Testament Theology into the less problematic discipline of the History of Religions. What not even the professional theologian, much less theology students, pastors and parishioners, can assimilate into his work, will at least be appreciated by the historian of religions. So in a certain sense New Testament Theology has a future by devoting itself exclusively to the critical historical presentation of the patterns of thought of primitive Christian religion.

In case the goal of New Testament Theology, to vindicate both the historical and the normative, does prove to be unattainable, one should consciously limit oneself to advancing the historical alone. For, as camouflaged Dogmatics, Biblical Theology is inappropriate, in that what is then presented as the historical foundation or legitimation of Dogmatics is actually only a projection back into the past of the modern theology that was to be grounded by the normative past. Yet an exclusive concentration on the historical task, as the form of New Testament Theology suited to the twentieth century, should admittedly be named "History of Primitive Christian Religion," not "New Testament Theology."

## II

Another possible answer to the question of the future of New Testament Theology lies in expanding the front opened up by Bultmann. He conceded fully that one cannot simply repeat the New Testament's thought patterns; yet he tracked down a stance lying behind them that can be brought into the present as a serious alternative laying a claim upon us. Of course, if what this meant were simply to supplement the historical by borrowings from modern times, nothing would be achieved. Since the terminology and even the whole approach of existentialistic interpretation were so new and for many so offensive, he was often accused of such modernism and hence rejected. But this was a serious mistake. Of course a Jesus, Paul or John could never have understood the terminology of demythologizing or existentialism. But, on the other hand, every science

speaks in the technical terminology of the specialist without thereby falsifying the object of research. Rather the criterion of an appropriate terminology is whether it brings the subject matter better to expression than did earlier terminologies. But here lies the progress of the terminology used by demythologizing and existentialist interpretation: Whereas antecedent research had concentrated almost exclusively on the level of consciousness, Bultmann penetrated deeper into the text so as to work out the understanding of existence lying behind the text, but an understanding of existence that was actually there in the first century. Rather than projecting back things from modern times into the beginnings of Christianity, Bultmann, as no one before him, discovered and brought to expression a whole overlooked dimension of the beginnings of Christianity. Even after his terminology has ceased to be modern and usable, his insight will nonetheless continue to be an inescapable part of what we know about primitive Christianity. Hence in seeking to evaluate this second possibility for a future of New Testament Theology, our interest is not in perpetuating a terminology and the position it suggests, but rather in recognizing, at some distance from the Bultmannian system, the epochmaking dimensions of his methodological approach and thus entering upon new methodological and material steps that need to be taken in a constantly shifting situation.

Bultmann not only went behind explicit doctrines to the understanding of existence they objectified. He also traced movements of language that the New Testament itself never presented explicitly as doctrines. For example, he was able to analyze the anthropological terminology of Paul in such a way as to make it possible to describe existentialistically the formal structure of man's being that Paul's language implied. Thus a procedure was carried through that can hardly be adequately described, in analogy to demythologizing, as the de-objectifying of conscious mythologoumena or theologoumena. For the structure of man's being is detected in a movement of language in Paul's writings of which Paul himself was no doubt largely unaware. This procedure, which actually points to the new hermeneutic and its presuppositions in the philosophy of language, illustrates a task of research that could, if applied consistently to the whole of primitive Christian literature, achieve important results for New Testament Theology. For the discipline of New Testament Theology would no longer be limited to such texts as contain a doctrinal construction, as Wrede maintained. Since an understanding of existence need not be conscious, the stream of consciousness, or conscious formulations of individuals, is not the only source of detecting an understanding of existence.

Admittedly, one cannot conceive of such a program of research in the future without recourse to linguistics. It is without a doubt the service of Erhart Güttgemanns and the circle he has drawn together around the journal *Linguistica Biblica* to have pressed home quite painfully this point. Furthermore such a task cannot be achieved

without recourse to the computer, even though it strikes us as equally strange and uncomfortable — just as, incidentally, half a century ago form criticism seemed to be an exaggerated and passing fad.

Only when we have learned to trace the movements of language within primitive Christianity can we do justice to the model that New Testament anthropology, as laid out before us by Bultmann, provides for a new epoch of New Testament Theology. For we can do justice to his work only by extending this beginning to other aspects that still await their clarification. Bultmann himself provided a certain guidance for this extension. To be sure, in his effort to make the New Testament intelligible as an alternative that can lay a real claim on us, he interpreted it in terms of its understanding of existence, and to this extent anthropologically. But he was not only interested in interpreting anthropological terms in this way. Rather, assertions of any and every content were investigated in terms of their implied understanding of existence. This was not intended in principle to narrow the theme of New Testament Theology to anthropology. For in view of man's historicness, an understanding of existence can by implication always contain an understanding of world, history and God. If Bultmann had not reached his creative period in the age of existentialism, he might have focused his breakthrough in another *locus* of theology, perhaps in a doctrine of *God*, as a late essay of 1962 suggested.<sup>15</sup> In what follows I would like to add a few further sketches which, though not yet worked out in detail, may serve to point out such an expansion of New Testament Theology beyond anthropology.

### III

How *are* things in the view of primitive Christianity? How does the *being* of things come to expression? Of course New Testament texts do not provide explicit *ontologies*. The authors were of course not philosophers. But even without philosophy, being can become clear in one way or the other, even though the speaker may be as unaware of it as was Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme* that for years he had been speaking prose. In all serious speaking, being is attributed to things, since language itself hides and hints the possibilities of being. So we do not need to wander forever in eschatology back and forth chronologically between the dawn of the imminent expectation and the delay of the parousia. God does not reign in another time or world, as if along side the beings with which we are familiar there is somewhere else another set of beings. When God's reign is pronounced upon beings, their being is exposed, i.e., the previous understanding of their being.

15. Rudolf Bultmann, "Zur Frage einer 'Philosophischen Theologie,'" *Einsichten* (Gerhard Krüger - Festschrift), 1962, pp. 36-38, reprinted in *Glauben und Verstehen* 4 (1965), pp. 104-06.

This ontological occurrence is not as such taught in the eschatological parables of Jesus, but it does happen in the language of the parables. For there God's reigning happens as a linguistic event of according to beings their true being. When this has once happened in a given situation, then something has happened to this situation that cannot be made retroactive. The antecedent understanding of being, or, more often, the common forgetfulness of being, can be continued only as a rejection of the call, in which case the being named onto the situation by the parable continues as a rejected possibility to condition the situation by judging and beckoning. The history of research on primitive Christian eschatology shows how God's reign, thought of as one present or future being among other beings, moved through the nothingness of the decline of the Constantinian West or through the nothingness of the delay of the parousia, on to the status of the language for the true being of beings, seen from the primitive Christian point of view. To observe the ontological difference, that is to say, to refuse to establish the given beings and to refuse to objectify their true being as just another of the beings, would be a sign of faith in God's reign.

When we go on calling the demythologized form of eschatology eschatological (in such expressions as "eschatological existence"), we are exposed to the criticism of contradicting the meaning of the term eschatology, by describing all sorts of present things but not anything that is future. To avoid this ambiguity inherent in the chronological overtones in the term eschatology, we should simply undertake the task of attaining from the linguistic movements of New Testament eschatology what one may best call ontological insight.<sup>16</sup>

One could also carry forward Bultmann's break-through in terms of a New Testament Theology that concentrated upon an understanding of world. If Paul could be presented as the model of an anthropological point of departure,<sup>17</sup> the Gospel of John can be mentioned equally well as a model for a point of departure in the understanding of world, as indeed Bultmann does project his Johannine theology upon the concept of the cosmos (Para. 42,1). Further, in his proposal of demythologizing Bultmann chose, as his point of departure for analyzing man's being apart from faith, the dialectic relation between "this world" and the world as God's creation; furthermore, to sketch man's being in faith, he took deworldification as his point of departure.<sup>18</sup> Hans Jonas, in his

16. Cf. my essay "Jesus' Parables as God Happening," *Jesus and the Historian* (E. C. Colwell - *Festschrift*), 1968, pp. 134-150.

17. Bultmann, "Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Ernst Käsemann," *Apophoreta* (Ernst Haenchen - *Festschrift*), Beiheft 30 to ZNW, 1964, p.69.

18. Bultmann, "Neuen Testament und Mythologie," *KuM* 1, 28-33, English translation "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, pp. 17-22.

dissertation on *The Concept of Gnosis* (1928),<sup>19</sup> laid the philosophical and methodological basis for demythologizing with the statement: "What is basic and at the same time specific in each concretion of existence consists in its relation to the world – and to itself." If at that time cosmology had been as fundamentally renewed as had been anthropology by Heidegger's analysis of existence, Bultmann could have followed a "cosmological" path that still today has not been carried through. This would mean that New Testament Theology, on the background of Jewish apocalypticism's rejection of this world and normative Judaism's conforming to this world, could have been carried through in terms of the otherworldly fanaticism of the primitive congregation moving toward the Pauline and Johannine unworldliness, but also to the Lucan and Constantinian worldliness, a trend that was constantly accompanied by a left wing of increasingly gnostic flight from the world.<sup>20</sup>

Since the student revolt of 1968, New Testament Theology, like the exegetical disciplines in general, seems to have as its theme basically non-binding topics, in that it seems unaffected by current social and political alternatives. Theology itself seeks new criteria, other than "authentic" and "inauthentic" existence, to gain a hearing. Dorothee Sölle states:

The question for Bultmann and for any theology is whether it makes men more capable of love, whether it encourages or obstructs the liberation of the individual and the community. Expressed scientifically, that is the verification principle; expressed biblically, the proof of the Spirit and of power (1 Cor. 2:4). Thus the question raised for Bultmann's theology concerns its openness to a political theology.<sup>21</sup>

As Sölle emphasizes, such a question could be answered positively in terms of Bultmann's theology, even though the ongoing development, especially in what she calls "the kerygmatic neoorthodox wing of the Bultmannian schools,"<sup>22</sup> hardly seems to confirm this. Even the concept of deworldlyfying, especially criticized by Sölle, could

19. Hans Jonas, *Der Begriff der Gnosis*, Teildruck, 1929-30, reprinted in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, II, 1, 1954, as the Introduction: "Zum Problem der Objektivation und ihres Formwandels," p. 9.

20. As an example of such a sketch of a development in intellectual history of late antiquity oriented to the understanding of world one may refer to Günther Gawlick's comments on the history of Stoicism in his review of Ulrich Wilchens' book *Weisheit und Torheit*, *PhR* 10 (1962) 299-302. Cf. my essay, "World in Modern Theology and in New Testament Theology," *Soli Deo Gloria* (Festschrift for William C. Robinson, Sr.), 1968, pp. 88-110, 149-151.

21. Dorothee Soelle, *Political Theology*, trans. John Shelley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 4-5. German original: *Politische Theologie: Auseinandersetzung mit Rudolf Bultmann* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1971).

22. Soelle, *Political Theology*, p. 19.

perhaps be interpreted in line with Sölle's position. For Bultmann thought "that the stance of faith is made open for human community through its being freed from the world."<sup>23</sup> Still Sölle would ask critically: "But can this openness to which the gospel frees us be conceived apolitically, in a vacuum of crucial life-possibilities and fortunes? From a theoretical point of view, existentialist philosophy as Bultmann understands it offers no basis for an apolitical interpretation, but Bultmann *de facto* limits this openness to individualistic existence."<sup>24</sup> Thus the New Testament scholar is called upon to interpret the whole New Testament in terms of sociology, and not only to bring together texts about the church into a New Testament ecclesiology, as has been done again and again. Rather he should interpret the linguistic movements in the New Testament in general in a *social* and *political* sense, and in this modern way interpret them *ecclesiologically*.

The future of New Testament Theology does not lie simply along the lines of Bultmann's "anthropological" direction, but rather in making audible the break-through carried out by him in exemplary fashion. We can move beyond the New Testament doctrinal constructs, which could only lead us into the business of an antique shop, and on into the movements of language that can be interpreted in terms of alternatives in the modern world, by extending them "theologically," "ontologically," "cosmologically," "politically," etc., so that the dogmatician and even the average man can once again either reject angrily or accept happily the Theology of the New Testament.

23. Bultmann, *KuM*, I, 33. English translation, p. 22.

24. Soelle, *Political Theology*, p. 42.

# The Authority of the Bible

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Our relation to the Bible has been deeply altered by the rise of the historical consciousness and its accompanying critical scholarship. The Bible is now intelligible to us as the literature of an ancient people produced over a period of many centuries. We are no longer bothered by the incredibility of many of its stories or by inconsistencies within it. The immoralities that are sometimes praised cease to disturb us because we perceive both the events and the praise as historical phenomena to be recognized and evaluated by us in the light of other norms.

But the same developments which have made the Bible intelligible have also made alien to us those portions which once seemed most immediately accessible and relevant. We can no longer find in the New Testament the normative statement of eternal moral and spiritual truths which need only to be proclaimed again in every generation. Much of what once appeared to be of this character now is seen as inextricably tied to eschatological and Christological beliefs that are strange to us. The devotional reading of the Bible, at least in its common forms, now appears an exercise more of projection than of authentic listening.

In this situation the question of the authority of the Bible has become acute for Christians. A number of Biblical scholars seriously question whether their work has any greater significance than would the scholarly study of Pindar or Thucydides. This questioning must be treated with candor and critical rigor. This paper will approach the issue of Biblical authority through examination of three influential responses and the formulation of a constructive position in relation to them.

## *I. Confessional Theology*

Recognizing that the Bible can no longer be viewed as objectively authoritative for all, several strands of theology have argued that it is subjectively authoritative for Christians. For the Christian it embodies revelation. Revelation is here a believer's word for that which, in or through the Bible, has shaped his faith. It points to a

givenness for him of a truth he knows is not given for all. Christian teaching is understood as the confession of this givenness and the articulation of what is thereby known. In recent times this confessional theology has taken two influential forms: Neo-orthodox and pluralistic.

In the Neo-orthodox form a fundamental distinction is made between the world and that which radically transcends it. Man is equipped with more or less adequate means of understanding the natural and historical events that constitute the world, but he has no means of comprehending what transcends it. Yet man's true destiny is bound up with this transcendent reality. Saving knowledge, which is knowledge of the transcendent, can be gained only as a gift from the transcendent and this self-communication of the transcendent is revelation. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to man, and as such it is the one ground of Christian faith and salvation. The Bible is its primal witness and our one source of knowledge of the revelation that has occurred. Christian doctrine is the attempt of believers in every age faithfully to formulate their faltering apprehension of the one revealed truth.

The relativistic form is best formulated by H. Richard Niebuhr.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's basic distinction is between inner and outer history. Outer history is history as publicly visible and recorded by scientific historians. Inner history is history as experienced and remembered, both by individuals and by communities. Inner history is the sphere of personal meaning. The Christian is one who shares the memories of the Christian community and finds the meaning of his life shaped by these. Within the mass of memories much is perplexing, but certain remembered events throw light upon the whole. This unifying illumination of the whole of inner history is revelation. The Bible is the record and bearer of the decisive communal memory of the Christian church, and it recounts the story of Jesus as the revelatory center of the inner history of Christians. Christian doctrine is the confession by Christians of how they understand ultimate reality in the light of their revelation.

The first of these two forms of confessional theology is bound up with supernaturalist motifs that are rapidly losing resonance. Niebuhr's form of confessional theology, on the other hand, remains persuasive.

My thesis in this section, however, is that the confessional approach to theology is not adequate to the emerging situation. This is not intended as a criticism of Niebuhr's book. On the contrary, that book expressed the situation of its time and offered a solution to the problem posed by that situation in a truly exemplary fashion. We who studied theology in that generation are deeply indebted to it. But the very success of the book and the spirit it embodied have created a new situation in which a new response is called for.

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).



In the time in which Niebuhr wrote, tens of millions of Americans identified themselves confidently as Christians. For a large percentage of them this was their primary identification, more basic to their self-understanding than their being Republicans, Midwesterners, or even Americans. Bible stories had played a large role in their upbringing and had established their sense of identity with the community whose history is recorded in the Christian Scriptures. Some had, however, come to realize that there are other communities of faithful people nurtured on other traditions which could not simply be dismissed as ignorant, wrongheaded, or benighted. They, too, were wrestling in their way with matters of ultimate concern and had received profound insights through their history, their saints, and their sages.

In this situation how could one reconcile the openness to all truth, which is called for by Christian faith itself, with the continuing particularism of that faith? One solution was to seek through philosophy and the comparative study of religion the basis of a universal religion to which all particular traditions could be subordinated. But Niebuhr saw that much of what is most valuable in every tradition is lost in this process. He proposed instead that each community recognize and confess its particularity, not in a spirit of mutual antagonism, but so as to be most open to what others have to teach while offering its own treasures for their consideration. This made possible the maintenance and development of the full richness of the Christian tradition without any sense of condemnation or condescension toward members of other communities.

Our situation is a different one. The young adults within our churches are not persons immersed in the Christian heritage and becoming aware that there are other points of view as well. They are persons who have grown up with a pervasive awareness of the conditionedness of all beliefs and the questionableness of all particularisms. For most of them the stories of the Bible are hardly more familiar or more existentially significant than the mythology of Greece, Norway, or Japan. Their idealistic self-identification is more likely to be universalistic than Christian, and if it is particularistic, it is more likely to be with a nation or a political movement than with a traditional religion. When Niebuhr's understanding of Christian doctrine as confession is grasped, it may well be respected, but it is respected as something "they" do, not as something that expresses "our" situation. In other words, when we understand the Christian community as Niebuhr does, the great majority of young adults, even those in the churches, see themselves as on the outside looking in rather than on the inside looking out.

One might accept this analysis of our situation and then say that we must change it. Perhaps we should develop a style of teaching our children and youth which will engraft them firmly to that inner history of which Niebuhr speaks. But before we adopt such a reform, we must ask why we should do so. What would be gained by

recovering the sense of inner identity with the history recorded in the Bible, supposing that were possible? That is, in what way is the perspective shaped by identification with that history *better* than the more universalistic one? One cannot answer that question without broadening the scope of theology. The theologian must attempt to show objective advantages of the Christian faith even while recognizing the particular and conditioned perspective from which he sees these advantages.

## *II. The New Hermeneutic*

Since World War II Rudolf Bultmann has been the most influential figure in Christian theology. His life work has focused on the interpretation of Scripture in such a way as to enable it to speak effectively in the modern world. His problematic talk of an act of God with its supernaturalistic connotations remained in some tension with his powerful thrust to interpret Scripture existentially and thus to demythologize.

Building on Bultmann's work, a number of Biblical scholars and systematicians have revived the term hermeneutic to refer to the process of interpretation through which the ancient text is enabled to speak to the contemporary ear. Under the leadership of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs some of them have declared that hermeneutic, as the responsible movement from text to proclamation, is the encompassing context of all theology. This theological position is the New Hermeneutic.

Thus defined, it may appear a rather conservative approach to theology, and there is no doubt that a conservative theology along these lines could be developed. But the leaders of this movement are not conservative in spirit or intention. The urgency of their task arises out of their clear recognition of the gulf between modern man and the text and of the great difficulty in interpreting the text so as both to take account of its original meaning and intention and to be relevant and effective in our time. To achieve this end the interpreter must turn attention away from the cognitive content of the text to its effect: the way it cut or the point it scored in its original context. The responsible interpretation of the text today is that interpretation which has the same effect, scores the same point, or cuts the same way in our situation. This may even require the contradiction of the cognitive import of the text!

The New Hermeneutic intends to help the preacher achieve simplicity, vividness, and power in his sermons. But the practice of the New Hermeneutic is not simple! The preacher in his study must make use of all the scholarly resources which should be invisible to his hearers. He is not free to score *any* point he happens to like, for he is commissioned to score that point which the text makes.

The strength of this approach is that it by-passes all objective

argumentation about the authority of the Bible. By enabling the text to be effective in the life of contemporary man, the New Hermeneutic facilitates its authoritative working. The authority of Scripture does not then occur as an abstract question. It occurs as an event.

Despite the attractiveness of this theology, it, too, is problematic. Can theology be contained within the hermeneutical arch from text to sermon? Can direct discussion of Biblical authority really be evaded in this way? To clarify the limitations of the New Hermeneutic as an inclusive theological position, three questions are addressed to Gerhard Ebeling, its leading systematic exponent.

1. Can the same effect be achieved now as originally by the text regardless of the difference in man's world view, convictional system, or vision of reality?

Let us consider first why this question is appropriate — even crucial. The program of the New Hermeneutic is to identify the effect of the text in its context and then to achieve — by different language — the same effect in our context. Can this program be carried out? For example, Jesus called for trust in God, whom he understood as his Father in heaven who knew all needs before they were mentioned and cared for both men and the lilies of the field. Ebeling explicitly asserts that God as the Father of Jesus Christ is not part of our context.<sup>2</sup> Therefore the proclamation today cannot call for trust in him or indeed in God understood in any other way. Instead Ebeling believes that the proclamation should seek to effect what he sometimes calls *Gewissheit* in the hearer.<sup>3</sup> The English translation is "certainty," but this has nothing to do with the confidence with which opinions are held. Rather it is a particular state of being, which is independent of beliefs and which requires no object. It is, in other words, neither "certainty that" nor "confidence in." It is rather a state of assuredness.

Ebeling's reason for moving in this direction is easy to appreciate. He does not want the preacher to understand his task as that of persuading members of his congregation to accept opinions at odds with modern common sense or scientific knowledge. Rather the preacher should offer his hearer salvation. If the receipt of salvation depends on being first convinced of doubtful truth-claims, the preacher can function only in the ghetto in which the doubtfulness of those claims is not yet realized.

Nevertheless, the question remains. Is Ebeling's objectless and contentless certainty fundamentally the same as what the New Testament speaks of as belief or trust in God or Christ? Perhaps it is

2. Gerhard Ebeling, *God and Word*, trans. by James Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 31.

3. This clarification of what Ebeling usually speaks of conventionally as faith is found chiefly in *Theology and Proclamation*, trans. by John Riches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966). See especially Chapter IV, "Towards a Christology."

the closest realizable analog in a world from which God is absent, but is there not, even so, a vast difference?

The point is not that Ebeling is to be rejected because he blurs this difference. The point is rather that whether there is such a difference and its importance and implications are topics that need to be discussed. That discussion falls outside of theology as defined by the New Hermeneutic.

2. Is there any sufficient reason to use the Biblical text as the basis for achieving the desired effect?

Let us suppose that much the same point can be scored today as was scored by the Biblical text despite the drastic change of language and context. Is there any reason to think that this point can now only or best be scored by taking off from a Biblical text? Does the value of scoring this point become visible only to those who see it as the point scored in the Bible?

For example, does what Ebeling calls certainty have any essential relatedness to the Bible or to the Christian tradition? Perhaps it was embodied by Jesus in an unusually complete way. Perhaps certainty has spread in history under Jesus' influence. Would that mean that one could achieve this state of being only or best by hearing texts related to him? If Ebeling were willing to allow that the attainment of certainty depended upon (or was facilitated by) the entertainment of some doubtful truth claims (in this case about Jesus' existential state), then one could see why the Biblical text might be an essential or desirable point of departure. But since that is not the case, what is called for is an empirical investigation of the circumstances under which certainty is most frequently attained. Should it prove to be the case that these circumstances are those of preaching in which no truth-claims doubtful to modern man are made, then Ebeling would be vindicated. But probably the results would be quite different.

That this question addressed to Ebeling is not an idle or merely abstract one is indicated by the intellectual development of Thomas Bonhoeffer, one of Ebeling's most gifted pupils. Bonhoeffer came to the conclusion that the state of being that Ebeling desired to achieve through preaching is both better described and more effectively attained by a psychological approach. Bonhoeffer may be wrong, but once again the subject requires a discussion excluded from the scope of theology by the New Hermeneutic.

The reason the question has not been raised in these terms is that the starting point in the Biblical text is taken as given for the Christian just as the Constitution is given for an American judge. The question in each case is not whether to accept the given but how to deal with it. Perhaps in Germany theology can still understand itself in these terms. There, preaching from the Biblical text is generally taken for granted as central to the life of the church. But in America one cannot simply define the church as the place where the Biblical text is proclaimed. If one did, the question would immediately arise as to the justification of the continued existence of the church now

that the Bible has lost the authority which once grounded this procedure. At least in the American situation, questions must be asked on which Ebeling throws little light.

3. Is there any real justification for seeking to realize just *this* effect?

Let us suppose that we had identified the effect attained by the Biblical texts in their original context, and that this effect could best be attained today by the kind of translation of those texts called for in the New Hermeneutic. Would there then be any reason to attempt to attain this effect rather than some other?

This question arises with special acuteness to the extent to which the effect sought is a peculiarly Christian one. If, for example, the effect sought is progressive maturation as defined by a dominant school of psychology, one could claim the support of that psychology for this goal. But then it is unlikely that the previous question as to why Biblical texts should be used could be answered. If the goal is a distinctively Christian one, differing from the goals sought in other religions and in various psychological schools, then the present question must be treated seriously. Why, after all, devote this immense energy to achieving this particular goal unless one has some reason to believe it is a peculiarly worthy one?

Ebeling understands the goal as certainty. If what he means by certainty is the same as what Zen Buddhism means by *satori*, then it is highly doubtful that the proclamation of Biblical texts leads in that direction as effectively as the practice of Zen disciplines. On the other hand, if it differs, then in a world in which seeking *satori* is a real possibility, one must consider whether he is justified in trying to lead others to Christian certainty instead.

The question of justification does not arise only in a comparison of Christianity with other ideas of salvation. It arises also when the historical character of Christianity is taken with full seriousness. Much theology is devoted to seeking an unchanging essence of Christian faith in the midst of obviously changing beliefs and social patterns. But what if there is no such essence? What if Christian faith is instead a force released in history through Jesus that can be traced only by its continuity — not by its self-identity? Then the attempt to produce today the same effect originally achieved might be unresponsive to the claim that faith now makes upon us. If so, preaching and theology have a quite different task.

To pose such an alternative is not to assert that Ebeling is wrong and the alternative is correct. But it is to assert that the issues between them require discussion and that the New Hermeneutic does not provide the context within which its own problematic assumptions can be adequately engaged.

### *III. A Modern Apologetic*

In our situation we cannot simply take the Biblical text as the established canon. We must of course recognize that this text played that role in the past, but we are increasingly free to decide that it shall not continue to play this role. Indeed, unless we provide some reason why it should, a reason better than the fact that it has done so in the past, we may confidently anticipate that it will not continue to do so.

It is not enough to confess that the Bible is revelatory for us, for we are not sure that it is. But we cannot evade the question of its authority by simply actualizing its potential efficacy, valuable though that is. On the other hand, we cannot return to supernaturalist assertions or to rational demonstrations of Biblical truth-claims. We do not want so to affirm Biblical authority as to shut ourselves off from truth that comes from other sources. Is there a way in which the authority of the Bible can be reasonably affirmed without arrogance and without curtailing openness?

We may understand such a theological possibility better if we first consider an analog in the economic-political sphere. Can a man reasonably affirm the authority of certain writings in that sphere without arrogance and without curtailing openness?

Suppose a man is a socialist by conviction. He believes that the socialist goal for society is the right one. He sees this goal most adequately understood and most intelligently furthered in the socialist party. He tries to strengthen that party as a means to the furtherance of that goal. To the extent that other parties seek other goals, he disagrees with them. That need not mean that he lacks respect for them. He may appreciate the attractiveness of a laissez-faire system and understand why others are committed to defending it. He even recognizes that he may be mistaken in his belief that socialism is to be preferred. He tries to remain open to persuasion, but meanwhile he continues to work for socialism and is pleased when his arguments persuade erstwhile supporters of free enterprise to join him. Furthermore, he recognizes that other parties and movements have at times done as much to further the cause of socialism as has his own. In this he rejoices. He may feel that the advances achieved by other parties have been due in the long run to the influence of socialists, but even if this is not the case he applauds their achievements. His interest is in the goal, not in the glory of his party. He believes that the advantages of socialism are shown by the history of human experience open to all and by a political reason operative in all, but he also knows that his own commitment arose directly in response to personal experiences, the influence of certain individuals, and the reading of particular writings. Such a person affirms the authority of certain classic socialist writings without arrogance and without curtailing openness.

A modern Christian who seems to have understood Christian faith in this way is Reinhold Niebuhr. He argues unabashedly for a view of history and of man which he finds in the Bible. There is no special pleading or appeal to authority. Reinhold Niebuhr is open to the evidence and to counter-argument. He wants to put the insights he has received from the Bible to the test of ongoing experience and to compare results with the application of other theories. When he does so, he finds that the dramatic view of life and history found in the Bible provides a more realistic and illuminating approach than do other views of man and history. To whatever extent this can be shown, the Bible has authority, as bearer of a superior revelation.

Reinhold Niebuhr's work is one of the great theological achievements of this century. Yet his argumentation does not quite succeed in our context. Formally, his appeal is to data recognized by all. The claim is that these data are best interpreted in the light of the Biblical understanding of reality. When the argument is carried on in the Western context the method works well. But when the argument is directed toward other religious traditions, it fails. The whole sense of history and its importance, which is a product of Biblical history, is presupposed as the ground for the selection of the data. Where this is lacking, there is no common test. In the end Niebuhr has shown that the Biblical vision which produced historical experience remains the best context for its interpretation. That is no mean achievement, but it does not show the Bible as revelatory for all human experience. Furthermore, in the West the sense of history is now rapidly fading, and our visionaries seek its total obliteration. Perhaps this is a catastrophe. Perhaps we need to struggle to reestablish the historical consciousness. But if this is our claim, it must be made on other grounds than those Reinhold Niebuhr has offered.

Reinhold Niebuhr tried to display the unique authority of the Biblical message by showing its superior capacity to illumine history much as a socialist might argue for the authority of Marx by displaying the superior power of his thought to explain events. But today we are more aware of the depths of pluralism. There is hardly more agreement on the data to be clarified than upon the message that clarifies. As Richard Niebuhr saw, theology must be conducted with full recognition of its pluralistic context. The new apologetic must recognize its limitations more clearly than Reinhold's program seems to do.

Strikingly, the traditional relation of confession and apologetic is now reversed. Confession was once the characteristic of the inner life of the Christian community. Apologetic was directed to those without. Today confession is the starting point for relating to those who stand in other traditions, whereas we need a vigorous apologetic directed to those who are Christian by tradition and sympathetically open to hearing the reasons for reaffirming their identity as Christian. To them any claim of special authority for the Bible must be justified.

In the light of this more modest view of the apologetic task much of the work of both Niebuhrs can be appreciated and appropriated. Even so the work needs to be done again in light of a clearer definition of our changed situation.

#### *IV. Why, Then, the Bible?*

The first three sections of this paper have been largely critical. Section I criticized Confessional Theology, Section II, the New Hermeneutic, and Section III, Reinhold Niebuhr's form of Apologetic Theology. But the intention is not to disparage any of these. On the contrary, they have been treated because of their relevance and value for the present situation. Richard Niebuhr is right that the Christian needs to confess that he has been shaped in his deepest perceptions and evaluations by a particular history. Ebeling is right that the goal of preaching and the church's ministry in general should be defined in terms of a mode of existence rather than the communication of truth-claims. Reinhold Niebuhr is right that the advantages of the Christian perspective need to be displayed in the arena of public discussion. Even so, none provides the starting point now needed. All direct attention away from some of the questions that must be discussed if sense is to be made of the authority of the Bible. This concluding section offers a schematic justification of Biblical authority on the basis of the results of the three preceding sections.

The purpose or mission of the Christian church is the sustaining, nurturing, and extending of a particular kind of existence, which we may call Christian existence. Tillich describes it as the new being, Bultmann, as authentic existence, Ebeling, as certainty. I prefer to describe it as self-transcending existence fulfilled in love. The Bible records and expresses that history in which Christian existence came into being. There is, therefore, a direct relation between the mission of the church and the Bible.

One may still ask, however, as to the justification of continual reference back to the Bible. Tillich, Bultmann, and Ebeling have not answered this question satisfactorily. This is because all three describe the relation of Christian existence to human existence in general in such a way that any special connection between Christian existence and the history of Israel or Jesus Christ is unintelligible. Bultmann relates the power of authentic existence to the kerygmatic proclamation, but given his Heideggerian understanding of man, the association appears arbitrary. Tillich recognizes that what he calls the new being was present fragmentarily before Jesus and that it has been present only fragmentarily since Jesus. On this view the New Testament picture of Jesus may present him as an ideal bearer of the new being, but clearly no relation to this picture is needed for fragmentary participation in it. Ebeling does display certainty as brought into being in the hearer through the word events that constitute Jesus' ministry. But since he holds that the possibility of such



word events is independent of the historical context, the origin with Jesus becomes a wholly inexplicable contingent fact, and the claim that certainty has no other origins in history is implausible. Yet the intention of all three theologians to establish the dependence of Christian existence on Jesus or the primitive kerygma is not to be dismissed as the result of ecclesiastical pressures. The evidence points to such a connection.

The difficulty for all three arises from their failure fully to acknowledge the historically determined character of human possibilities. The history of a culture determines the range of possibilities open to those born into it. This range is extended when a member of one culture encounters a member of another, but we may not assume that such an encounter immediately makes possible to each the kind of existence embodied in the other.

Christian existence could not spontaneously have come into being in Greece, India, China, Mexico, or the Congo. It could only have come into being in Israel. Having arisen there and then contacted other cultures, it became a more or less real and immediate possibility within them, requiring more or less drastic changes of the modes of existence. Wherever Christian existence is found we may assume some historical connection with Jesus Christ.

This assertion requires a more precise characterization of Christian existence and a more pluralistic account of other forms of existence than Tillich, Bultmann, and Ebeling have offered us. If, as all three suggest, there are just two possible modes of existence — one unsatisfactory and the other desirable — it is arrogant and unwarranted to claim that the latter is realized only in Christianity and that all other forms of existence are sufficiently understood by being lumped together in the negative category. The Indian holy man is not illumined by being associated with that of the Western legalist. Neither is he understood if one identifies his attainment with Christian existence. I have tried elsewhere to contribute to the formulation of a more precise and more pluralistic understanding of modes of existence.<sup>4</sup>

The same procedure which establishes the historical dependence of Christian existence on Jesus Christ reintroduces the problem of relativism. There is a plurality of ideal modes of existence rather than a single one which appeals immediately to all mankind. To be a Christian is to affirm one ideal and goal rather than others, and there is no final court of appeal for determining which should be affirmed.

However, the situation is not so painfully arbitrary or competitive as this may sound. To affirm the Christian goal is not primarily to reject the Buddhist goal; it is more often to help men overcome the antithesis of legalism and antinomianism in which they are caught, in the experience of responsible freedom. That is a goal which many experience as self-validating. Where the choice does lie between goals

4. John Cobb, *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

that now appear ultimate, we should cultivate mutual appreciation and esteem. We should remain open to the possibility that fuller reflection will cause us to convert to the other goal, or that a new goal may appear that can encompass both. But even under those circumstances what we had done to further the Christian goal would not prove to have been worthless. We need not hesitate to commit ourselves to the good we know because there is the possibility of a still greater good of which we are ignorant.

Recognizing the inadequacy of these comments, let us nevertheless assume that we have reached certain conclusions. Christian existence is a distinctive mode of being, introduced into the world through Jesus. To be a Christian is to hold this mode of existence as ideal or normative, even if one recognizes that there *may* be some still higher possibility. The mission of the church is to actualize Christian existence.

The question to which we now turn is that of the present role of the Bible. The Bible records the events surrounding the first appearance of Christian existence. All other instances of Christian existence are historically dependent upon those events. But does that mean that they are dependent on knowledge of them? The answer to that question is negative. Christian existence can survive loss of memory of Christian origins, and it can even be spread by those who intentionally disassociate themselves from those origins.

The analogies in other areas are obvious. One can be profoundly indebted to Aristotle or Marx without knowing anything of this relation. Or, if one knows of the relation, he may deny that he is an Aristotelian or a Marxist while at the same time remaining fundamentally determined directly or indirectly by their influence.

If Christian existence can be brought into being and sustained without intentional reference to its origin, is there any advantage in repeated reference to the Bible? Or should we experiment with new techniques for realizing the goal? The answer should be both/and rather than either/or. The reading and proclamation of Biblical texts is becoming decreasingly effective in the realization of the church's goal, whereas there are other means, some personal encounter groups, for example, by which Christian existence (without the label) is being effectively furthered. But if the Bible is set aside in favor of group dynamics, there is no assurance that group dynamics will function to further Christian existence. What is furthered depends on the conscious or unconscious ideals of the leaders and members of the groups. The same kind of group interaction which sometimes furthers Christian existence also sometimes furthers antinomian and legalistic patterns.

In some way the goal itself needs to be vividly articulated and portrayed. Such portrayals can be found in the great writers of the Christian West. Augustine and Francis, Luther and Pascal, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard have presented us with masterful statements which in many ways transcend anything that can be found in the

Bible. Why should we not substitute for the archaic Bible these masters of the faith, or at least give them a place of equality alongside the Biblical writers?

The first reason for retaining the primacy of Biblical authority is that it functioned as the norm for those whose work might be used to replace it. We could not use Augustine or Luther instead of the Bible without rejecting Augustine and Luther themselves. We could not avoid the problems inherent in viewing the Bible as normative by using such later sources, since they used the Bible as normative with less historical understanding than is available to us.

But these obvious points can be countered by arguing that the normativeness of the Bible for these men was tied to supernaturalistic conceptions from which we have been freed. Perhaps Gandhi, or Schweitzer, or Tillich, who recognized their historical indebtedness to the Bible without according it any supernatural status, have provided an understanding of existence which is both Christian and more immediately appropriate to guide us today.

Certainly a contemporary can speak with more directness to our need than an ancient book. This is the reason for the sermon! But he does so by relating to immediately current problems and modes of thought, which in their turn are rapidly superseded. Again and again it has proved more fruitful to return to direct confrontation with the Bible rather than to build exclusively on the work of the preceding generation. Is this merely by chance, or is there some reason this should be so?

Having abandoned supernaturalism, we cannot explain the superiority of the Bible in terms of the contrast of Word of God and word of man. We must argue instead that in this as in many other cases an historical emergent is best grasped in its primal form. What emerges can be greatly extended and enriched, and if it is to survive it must be developed in many ways to meet new needs. These developments may be responsible to the essence of the emergent. Nevertheless, in their elaborated forms they will contain much that is determined by particularities in the new situations and irrelevant elsewhere. Even in its primal form the distinction between what is essential to the emergent and what is contingently determined by its context is not easy to make. But it is there, if anywhere, that it can be made.

The new emergent to which reference has been made is Christian existence. But in the Bible the emergence of this new mode of existence is intertwined with that of a vision of reality which involves beliefs about God and about Jesus. Christian existence can survive and even be extended apart from these beliefs, yet in every generation the chief agency for bringing Christian existence into being has been the inculcation of some such beliefs. Christian existence is closely associated, for example, with understanding oneself as living from God and for God and as responsible for oneself before the God who knows one's secret thoughts and forgives at

great cost. Where no analog of this vision of reality is present, Christian existence survives on capital, that it cannot repay and must soon exhaust. The Biblical expression of the Christian vision of reality is just as important for us as the Biblical witness to the new mode of existence.

There is a more fundamental challenge to the authority of the Bible for contemporary Christians. What it means to be a Christian today differs profoundly from what it meant to be a Christian in the first generation of the church. Christianity as a vital force in history has its own inner development as well as being profoundly shaped by other great cultural and religious movements. The present reality of faith, even the mode of existence to which we are now called, may be different from that to which the New Testament points.

If we view faith as a dynamic and self-transcending force in Christian history, then indeed our understanding of our relation to the Bible is altered. Rather than seeking an essential form of faith identical with that witnessed to in Scriptures, we must seek to discern in the present the movement of the spirit that is continuous with a movement begun in primitive Christianity.

Even so the Bible remains authoritative. We can discriminate the process of faith within the present only as a trajectory whose early stages are already discernible in the New Testament. Without attention to the origins, we cannot make reliable judgments in the present.

This historical view of faith is more ultimate than the essentialist. Faith, too, even in the sense of the Christian mode of existence, has a history. The way ahead must involve very deep changes, especially through encountering the great religious traditions of Asia. But change at this level is very slow. We still live from a self-transcending structure of existence brought into history through Jesus, and we are still called, through concern for the other, to overcome the destructive tendencies toward self-preoccupation inherent in that structure. The New Testament remains the authentic witness to this mode of existence. If the Christian is now called to a new kind of existence, it must be one which encompasses the attainments of the old. For that test the Bible remains authority.

In conclusion, I shall direct to the position here developed the three questions asked of Ebeling in Section II.

1. Can the same effect be achieved now as originally by the Biblical text regardless of the difference in man's world view, convictional system, or vision of reality?

Whereas Ebeling's program requires an unequivocal affirmative answer, my answer is highly equivocal. Yes, in individual cases Christian existence can be or remain actualized in conjunction with visions of reality quite alien to the Biblical one. But this does not mean, as it seems to mean for Ebeling, that we can be indifferent to the way in which men symbolically organize their experience. For the context of beliefs in which Christian existence arose was essential

to its origin, and without analogous beliefs, Christian existence cannot survive indefinitely.

2. Is there any sufficient reason to use the Biblical text as the basis for achieving the desired effect?

My answer is again equivocal. In many individual instances the desired effect can be achieved better without reference to the Bible. But in the long run it is the Bible which guides us in the understanding of the effect which is sought as well as in the understanding of reality associated with it.

3. Is there any real justification for seeking to realize just *this* effect?

Recognizing the limits of our experience and knowledge, the answer to any question about an ultimate commitment must be provisional. There may be some better goal. Indeed, we must hope that there are better forms of existence than any that have thus far had widespread embodiment. Also we must be open for very fundamental changes in Christian existence itself. But when Christian existence is understood in its past actuality and its future potentiality, clearly and openly compared with available options, the goal of its realization can elicit whole-hearted support.

# Against the Confusion in Today's Christianity

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## I. The State of Confusion

Christianity finds itself today in a state of confusion. The effects of this confusion appear particularly crass in German Protestantism. The bond of church fellowship threatens to rupture. The unity in faith is in question. The power of patient love appears exhausted. There are not a few who view the situation as hopeless.

A deep insecurity prevails concerning faith. The conception of the basis of faith and what faith confesses differs considerably. We speak different languages, even though we use the same words. That which is essential to the assertion of Christian faith for one person is for another unintelligible and a hindrance to faith. The scale of different positions extends from clinging anxiously to the letter of the Bible to the shocking abandonment even of the word "God."

The causes of this crisis are attributed to the tension between the piety of the laity and academic theology. But by doing this we oversimplify and distort the situation in a disastrous way. The problem is too complex and the difference of conceptions too varied for one to be able to press them all into one scheme, which only takes account of the crude extremes and tries to determine them in terms of particular interest groups and institutions. Still the differences among the theologically less informed Christians are at least as great, if not greater, than those of the theologians. It is true that the former tend more towards an unreflected and narrow conception of what is Christian. Either they esteem such a conception as orthodox and pious, or they back off from it with a bad conscience or indifference. It is significant that those who oppose Christianity have a special liking for an oversimplified portrait of Christianity. Even among theologians there are those who further the cause.

The theologian can only fulfill his task if he can critically and reflectively account for the Christian faith within a broad cultural horizon. This naturally exposes him to the danger or at least the suspicion of reckless modernism. Nevertheless, we should not judge theology in general in regard to its modernistic extremes. Rather,

these extremes must be understood and critically evaluated in light of the task of theology itself. The fundamental task of theology is continually to reflect upon and to account for the subject matter of the Christian faith with respect to its contemporary concern. Therefore, we should not insinuate that theology first produces the problems with which it later must come to terms. It is much more the duty of theologians, if they wish to be responsible for faith, to recognize and face the problems that engage them in their time. For this reason, theology is a necessary service in the life of Christianity. It would be absurd to play off piety, as it pertains to the life of Christian faith, against theology.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny the fact that the present insecurity about faith is deeply connected with the theological situation. For theology today finds itself to a great degree in a critical relation to the traditional understanding of Scripture and church tradition. To be sure, the intention of this critical relation is to clarify the nature of Christian faith and to remain in harmony with its truth. But this is not at once perceivable for those who are not able and willing to participate at least to some degree in the theological reflection. The multitude of rapidly changing theological positions is symptomatic of the fact that we encounter difficulties and insecurity. This makes it difficult for the non-theologian to orient himself and causes him to be suspicious. Naturally, the impression on the part of the non-theologian that he has been cast into the whirlpool of this development has a resulting anti-theological effect. The correct insight that faith must be certain and should not be dependent upon wavering opinions can lead him to an obvious "short circuit." He may commit himself uncritically to a view of faith that evades its responsibility in respect to the contemporary experience of the world.

In hitherto existing discussions the insecurity concerning what is received by faith and what faith has to *say* has been given the major attention. Lately this kind of insecurity has been supplemented and surpassed by another insecurity concerning what faith has to *do*. This situation has been growing for a long time and now has suddenly flared up. Once again the relationship of these two problems to one another is being threatened by extreme tendencies toward oversimplification which only increase the confusion. In light of the concentration of Christian involvement for the revolutionary change of social structures and, for this purpose, the functional change of ecclesiastical institutions, we are ready to conclude that the discussion about the concern and language of faith is obsolete. On the one hand, as theology applies itself to traditional texts, it is depreciated by the revolutionary front. On the other hand, since theology uses the historical-critical method, it is accused and attacked by a conservative ecclesiasticism. This same conservatism, moreover, too easily declares irresponsible activism, an opposition to tradition, as simply the practical consequences of so-

called modern theology. But academic theologians judge such activism critically, or at least relate themselves to such activism with careful discrimination. For regardless of how we answer the ethical questions, they will lose their proper association with that which is Christian, if we do not take seriously the question of truth as it relates to faith and if we handle the tradition of faith carelessly.

## *II. Aids to Understanding*

After having sketched the situation in the church and theology, it seems almost impossible to speak to this situation in a helpful way. The extremists on both the left and the right dominate the scene. The actually existing insecurity has passed under the guise of a quite resolute security. Misunderstanding has turned into callous distrust. Instead of struggling with the difficulties of understanding, many have taken the easy way out with superficial judgements and accusations. Wherever this type of demagogic agitation prevails, the desire to differentiate is considered a sign of weakness. We have fallen into a devilish circle of escalation, in which one almost needs exorcistic authority to prevail against it.

The flood of explanations about the situation does not particularly encourage me to join in with another contribution. Indeed, one-sided statements can, as propaganda, sharpen the situation, but they scarcely clarify it. On the other hand, carefully considered remarks easily have the tendency of becoming apologetic and appeasing, and scarcely avoid being misinterpreted by all sides. They "scatter to the winds" without any effect, and the more they occur, the more they diminish their chance of being heard. At any rate, the results produced after a long process of consultation usually lose their cutting edge. Still, in the early stages a personal declaration could be highly influential. However, the questions that have cropped up demand so much information and competence that we cannot fulfill these demands by means of a "word to the situation."

But the concern of faith is not helped very much by resignation. Theological responsibility is, to be sure, determined by the fact that Christian faith as such is certainty. With the irritating and unsettling conditions of modern times, this is particularly the case today. This certainty of faith expresses itself in both word and deed. And it has its foundation in the Word-deed (Tatwort) of God, which it presupposes. Only the testimony of Jesus Christ as the basis of certainty can make the expression of certainty unequivocal. Therefore, in a time of confusion and insecurity what must be said in the name of faith must serve this certainty. It would be fatal for faith if we placed our hope concerning this certainty in an imaginary future when theology had resolved the



pressing problems. Just as life and death cannot be put off, so the question of the certainty of faith cannot be deferred until a later time.

Whoever is responsible for theology, therefore, cannot leave his fellow Christian in the lurch in this time of confusion and uncertainty. Being conscious of the limits of such an undertaking, he must try to speak a clarifying word. For this it is helpful to remember that the certainty of faith does not grow out of theological reflection. It originates in the intimate experiential contact with the testimony of Christ. But this certainty of faith will be impeded and will languish if it is not reflected upon by everyone according to what can be expected of him in relation to the whole of his experience of reality and his consciousness of truth. Theological reflection provides assistance as it unmasks resistances, as it straightens out misunderstandings, and as it points out characteristic features in which faith expresses itself in word and deed. The value of this service of theology for the life lived in the certainty of faith should not be depreciated. And just as this life cannot be settled in one single act, so the service of theology must take place as an unceasing struggle with the causes of confusion.

In the light of the aforementioned aids to understanding, I must take the risk of indicating some problems which must be considered and which no one who wishes to join in the conversation can avoid taking into consideration. I simply want to point out some possible directions for further reflection, which can contribute to the clarification of the situation only when such effort is persistent and multifaceted, continually considering the many layers of each question. False expectations can only bring to naught the modest advantage such an attempt might have. We should therefore not expect exhaustive answers. It is enough if we can come to some degree of clarity concerning the necessary ways of questioning, and thereby comprehend the direction in which we ought to reflect. It is not my intention to fulfil the pressing desire for an adult catechism. My attempt is, at best, a preliminary work. No one should be offended if I speak in a language which one cannot at once make one's own. Naturally many others would say things differently, adding some things and easily leaving out others. In comparison with the wide spectrum of possible ways to say and express things, I will consciously restrict myself in what I have to say. This qualification arises out of the conviction that, even though the effort towards a consensus is urgently necessary, the formulations helping to bring about such a consensus can only be individually expressed and risked.

### *III. Historical Background*

It is essential that we take into account the historical backgrounds of the contemporary situation and its problems. Of course

this approach today is opposed by a widespread and deeply rooted anti-historical attitude. To be able to comprehend our own time in its broad historical relations independent of the prevailing outlooks and presupposed historical view is in general a difficult goal to obtain. The way of thinking as we find it among natural science and technology, especially in its trivial form, reinforces the dearth of the sense of history. In addition, a great part of the younger generation has presently become fascinated by a revolutionary ideology which, because of its radical alienation from past history, wishes to create history. The protest against authoritarian traditions has been generalized into an a-historical attitude, whose rational and critical demand is strongly emotional and is applied in a dogmatic way.

The Christian faith has an intensive relation to history. Nevertheless, an historical blindness also permeates faith's sphere of influence. To reconcile the claim of eternal truth with being conditioned by time is indeed difficult, so far as that temporality should not be understood superficially. Thus it appears to be a necessary postulate of faith that its statements are removed from time. Accordingly, it appears incompatible with the authority of the Bible to read it historically and therefore also unnecessary to reflect upon the historical distance and development that lies between our time and that of the Bible. Thus, we can easily believe we are attending to the tradition of faith, when in reality we are only preserving a traditional view of faith. We then replace the source of Christian faith with a product of church history.

Historical knowledge can mediate the very useful and general insight that since apostolic times there have been differences of opinion and tensions within Christianity. Traditionalist and progressive tendencies have always contended with one another in some sort of form. Fanatical types of traditional and modern legalism have always collided with one another as opposing extremes. Theology too was often defamed and in many cases brought discredit upon itself. However, it is not enough to console ourselves with such examples or to refer to them as warnings. For an historical comprehension of our situation, it is necessary for us to consider the circumstances which conditioned the particular constellation of problems that press hard upon us. The range of problems that we should take into consideration can be variously approached. But in order to approach the fundamental problems, we must go far back in history.

The customary conception of Christianity, especially of its ideas of faith and of the normative meaning of its teaching, has been much more determined than we usually realize by the period in which the church existed within a closed ecclesiastical world. The distinction between sacred and profane was, to be sure, an important part of that ecclesiastical world. In addition, there was actually a whole profusion of tensions between various types of

piety, theological tendencies, church factions, political authorities, and so on. Yet all this was, as it were, permeated by the stream of tradition in which biblical and ancient heritages, faith and reason, were combined. They were fused together into one interconnected truth. The idea of orthodoxy is characteristic of this ecclesiastical world. It raises the undifferentiated claim of universal truth, which implies also the privilege of recognition in public. Ecclesiastical doctrine has the task of regulating and limiting the use of reason. Therefore, orthodoxy affirms a theology which, under the conditions of orthodoxy, stands in harmony with philosophy and science. The task of theology, however, is not only to assert this harmony, but to set it forth in careful and detailed work.

As a result of the peculiar historical circumstances of late antiquity and the early middle ages, the Christian faith became the catalyst of an entire culture. Even though the elements of this culture were not of Christian origin, they were still mediated and integrated by Christian faith. This has given rise to the illusion that the fruits of this Christianizing process are normative for the comprehension of Christianity itself. Naturally we do not succumb to this deception in every regard in the same degree. Least of all will we permit today the union of church and state, although a great deal could be learned if we considered the way in which Christians once were ready to take political responsibility upon themselves.

On the other hand, the remarkable tradition-oriented stability of the medieval period, the relative unity of its view of reality that was harmonized with the Christian faith, the continuity of its basis of culture that was able to bind the generations together — all these factors and whatever else was associated with them belong, according to the prevailing opinion, to the standard conception of the Christian faith. Thus we mistake cultural forms of Christianity for that which belongs intrinsically to the nature of Christian faith. We often do this without asking to what extent these cultural forms either express or, instead, alienate that which is specifically Christian. Many characteristic traits of traditional dogmatic conceptions (i.e., peculiar traits in regard to the doctrine of Scripture, the meaning of history, the relation between reason and revelation, etc.) have been stamped by a particular period in the history of the church, and obtain in this way the appearance of orthodoxy.

Nearly all the problems that have contributed to the present crisis in Christendom are related, in some way or another, to tasks that have emerged out of the transition from a closed ecclesiastical world to a totally different kind of historical period. These problems have not yet been overcome. The modern era is situated under the sign of an ongoing technical and rational conquest of the world. It is characterized by the fact that only that which can be objectively verified and empirically calculated can be accepted as general and binding truth, irrespective of statements of faith. The

reverse of this limitation is the prodigious and emancipating extension of scientific skills and possibilities. Modern science has had to fight its way free from an ecclesiastically directed and tradition-bound science. The fact that the Christian faith was so closely bound up with a passing state of the world has become, even until today, the cause of tragic misunderstandings. The Christian faith itself appears, in part, to be the enemy that modern science has to fight, while on the other hand many feel compelled to defend in the name of faith scientific positions that are no longer tenable.

As is always the case in a period of radical historical change, the changeover to modern times and the transition of Christianity into this new phase of its history is also a many-layered process, which stretches out over a long space of time. This process of change is particularly complicated, but also unusually meaningful, because of the Reformation, which produced a reconsideration of the Christian faith by a return to its source. In this way the closed ecclesiastical world was burst open from within, and a critical revision of the historical development of the church was inaugurated that penetrated to the roots and yet did not deteriorate into fanatical extremes. Therefore, next to such trends that ran parallel to and furthered the movement into the modern world, another trend, deriving from the Reformation, deserves special attention. Here another understanding of what is Christian broke through and made possible a genuine confrontation between the modern period and Christian faith. To be sure, as Protestantism first began to take on the form of an ecclesiastical and theological confession, it seems that it was only producing a modified restoration of the closed ecclesiastical world. And yet, the heritage of the Reformation was able to install the freedom and strength that enabled Christianity to enter into the modern period in such a way that it was not compelled to defend the existence and thought-forms of earlier periods in the history of the church, but rather was able to open new directions of church history. This process is, to a certain extent, still in its beginning stage. Roman Catholicism has recently begun to participate in it. In order to cope with the encounter with the modern world, it is no accident that Catholicism is making an effort for a new relationship to the legacy of the Reformation.

#### *IV. The Relation of the Gospel to Time*

Historical reflection increases awareness of present responsibility. But if now we hold to the position that the changed historical situation must be taken into account, the suspicion arises that the truth of the Christian faith will be accommodated to the needs of the time or even to the prevailing fashions and accordingly reduced or distorted. That there are considerable dangers here is

undeniable. The history of the church in the modern period, and not the least in recent times, offers us abundant examples of crass or subtle modernizations that impair the purity and strength of the Gospel. To denounce single symptoms would not be of much help without careful expositions. But above all, having reprovved such manifestations, we cannot avoid a task that is necessary in spite of danger and failure. No form of Christian witness is free from the marks of its time. It is easy for us to overlook this in something with which we are familiar. Only in that which is unusual and strange does it strike us. And yet by anxiously holding to the familiar we cannot escape our time. New-fashioned or old-fashioned—they are only different variants of temporal dependency.

In order to avoid trivially reducing the state of affairs to a question of fashions and thus causing the controversy to become fruitless, we must ask ourselves: What does the relation to time have to do with the content of the Christian proclamation? We would be seeing only *one* side of the problem if we let it go with the following observation: The Christian faith, like all forms and expressions of human life—and especially in thought and language—is entangled in historical change. Thus understood, it would be only a question of a limitation to which the Christian faith is also subjected. We could then comfort ourselves with the further observation that the changeable is only superficial and incidental, whereas the important core is not human but divine, and therefore unchangeable. To be sure, there is some truth in this observation. Yet the explanation employing the distinction between core and shell fails, because the division it suggests is not applicable in the case of historical change. We can separate a seed from its shell. But we cannot separate the Gospel from the ever changing, historically determined language in which it is proclaimed.

This brings us to another very important point. The fact that the communication of the Gospel participates in the historical change to such a large degree suggests precisely the power that it has and that is characteristic of its content. The sameness and constancy of the Gospel in history is not that of a fixed law, which is imposed upon the subsequent course of time and other dimensions of life, and which dictates the way in which they should be shaped or reshaped. Rather, it is a matter of the identity of a life-giving power, which neither originates in nor takes its rise from human life, and yet is deeply engaged in human life. This matter could be clarified in the light of the biblical concepts: faith, Spirit, and eternal life. That life-giving power of the Gospel is understood in accordance with God and is effective as life only when it is related to human life in the concrete reality of experience, with its gifts and tasks, its accomplishments and failures, its hopes and fears—related in such a way that it judges

and liberates, destroys and enlivens. The Gospel would not be the message of salvation for the world, if it did not concern a lost humanity in its history and particularly in every area of history, and if it did not enter into extremely different languages and cultures in a liberating way. The Gospel is essentially a world-wide mission. And the Gospel is at work only when it enters into historical life in this liberating way. That does not mean that it detaches itself from Jesus Christ, who is the source, basis, and sum of the Gospel. Because Jesus Christ is this and remains so, the transmission of the Gospel by means of those who witness to it goes on as a continual movement from the original to the present witness, from the Scripture to proclamation. Therefore Gospel in the strict sense is this *viva vox*, this responsible witness that is grounded upon Scripture amidst the contemporary experience of reality.

The question of how the Christian faith is related to the modern period becomes then the question: Does the Christian faith persist in the modern period simply as a relic of earlier times? Or does it reveal itself under the changed historical conditions to be that which is necessary for true liberation — and that means: for salvation? To be sure, we might say that just the opposite is true, namely, that the modern period has brought the Christian faith into distress and anxiety. But we must be careful here, lest we interpret this situation with explanations that appear to be pious but contribute nothing to a clearer diagnosis. Many lament the rise of new types of heresies as well as the growing forces of unbelief and the increase of doubt and indifference, hostility and apostasy. There is obviously some truth in these observations. However, neither the root nor the extent of the crisis has yet been recognized. Therefore, it would be an illusion to think that the meeting of the challenge is simply a question of having the courage to confess one's faith and of standing by the pure doctrine. This view is based on the following presupposition: the context and the relevance of the Gospel can be taken for granted; the Gospel only needs to be expressed without much ado, and then used as a standard of judgment. But just here lies the essential problem.

Certainly the source of the original Christian witnesses can be unequivocally indicated: the Bible. Likewise, we can refer to standard doctrines and confessions of the church and to important theological statements in which the understanding of Scripture is explained and points of dispute are clarified. But still that is not enough. If we wish to avoid subordinating Scripture to a particular ecclesiastical tradition or an ecclesiastical interpretive authority and to let Scripture alone be regulative, we must recognize two things. First, the biblical witness is in itself very diverse; and, second, this witness can only be received and transmitted in words for which we ourselves can account. Both factors are correlated with one another. The diverse testimonies of the Bible cannot be reduced to

the uniformity of a system of dogmas. At the same time, this does not mean that this diversity implies a contradictory maze of theological opinions. Rather, it is the documentation of an ongoing interrelated occurrence of proclamation. What unites the biblical witnesses is the living relationship to the living God, as he is made known in the Old Testament as the God of Israel and in the New Testament as the Father of Jesus Christ, and as one who can only be confessed in living witness. For this reason, the manifold testimony of the Bible directs us to the proper use of Scripture, namely, to allow ourselves to be brought into a living relationship to God by means of Scripture, so that we will be empowered to join individually in the chorus of witnesses.

The necessity of having transmittible doctrinal formulas, upon which we can again and again rely, is therewith by no means contested. Whoever has felt responsible for the transmission of the Christian proclamation and has experienced his own inadequacy and fallibility, can readily appreciate the value of helpful texts, plain language, and proven formulas. Nevertheless, doctrinal formulas are abstractions. As such they are certainly necessary, in order that they may be used appropriately. We use them properly when, instead of simply repeating them, we learn to orient ourselves in respect to them. That is, they should extend our own experience and thought, and help us to order and examine them. They are, so to speak, rules that need to be applied and tested. This dependency upon the transmitted language of faith holds good all the more for the daily life of faith. Such a life needs words that are reliable and make it possible for it to express itself in respect to God and to man. Nevertheless, there is the danger here of reverting to mere repetition as soon as language and reality are no longer related to one another and there is no experience of faith to give one's words spirit and power. Even the biblical texts do not free us *from* a proclamation for which we can accept responsibility. Rather, they free us *for* such a proclamation, challenge us and enable us for it.

These relations and connections first became conscious factors with the advent of the modern period. And in the end the understanding of what is specifically Christian has thereby benefited. Nevertheless, the difficulties of understanding initially predominate. In the face of the traditional views, which arose during the period when a closed ecclesiastical world existed, considerable rethinking is mandatory. During the last two and a half centuries Protestant theology has, for the most part, bravely accepted this task, although with varying success and without ample effect upon the church and the public. Some aspects have prevailed within theology as almost indisputable points of knowledge, other issues are still contested, while others have scarcely been considered or even grasped. The neuralgic points are principally the use of the Bible, the understanding of the reality of

faith, and the Christian maintenance of responsibility for the world.

### *V. The Biblical Text*

Our use of the texts of the Christian tradition, especially the Bible itself, cannot evade the methodology that has come into being through the historical consciousness for the use of texts in general. To establish exceptions for the sake and in the name of faith would be an absurd perversion of faith into a law and would foster dishonesty. Measured by traditional views, of course, the taking seriously of the factor of historicity appears to destroy the authority of the Bible. The historical-critical method opened our eyes to the fact that, in regard to the tradition, much is different than we had traditionally thought, whether it was a particular tradition of interpretation or the transmitted text itself that suggested views which could not stand up under careful historical inquiry. Because such opinions seem to be defended by the authority of traditional interpretation or by the texts themselves, the conflict between historicity and authority is obviously unavoidable.

Individual and general principles interlock here in a variety of ways. The evident facts of a textual tradition rich in variant readings necessitates a critical evaluation of the text, so that conclusions are drawn, independent of all other reasons, which inevitably dispose of the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The literary-critical method, including the method of form-criticism, conveys to us, in contrast to the naive reader, very different conceptions of the historical origin of the biblical writings and their earlier oral traditions — comparable to the strange difference that exists between modern physical and naive concepts of matter. The historical-genetic method investigates the historical processes that lie behind the text and are reported, explained, misrepresented, or concealed in the text. Through the comparative study of religions, historical influences are uncovered which bring into question the idea of an immediate and original revelation. Finally, the indispensable critical investigation concerning the matter of the Bible itself (*Sachkritik*) encompasses a large scale: from harmless observation (e.g., chronological mistakes) to more important ones (such as the questioning of the historicity of the something that has been transmitted with the claim to or at least the appearance of an historical report) and finally to the especially delicate questions that touch on the understanding of reality itself (whereby once again the problem scale covers a wide range: from the question of angels and miracles to the question of the resurrection and ultimately to the question of God).

The working through of these problems encounters many difficulties and causes painful wounds. This is humiliating but also



understandable. Above all, a false understanding of authority, connected with corresponding effects upon the understanding of revelation and faith, creates confusion. This is an especially clear example of how a particular way of interpretation, originating in the former period of a closed ecclesiastical world, can claim the title of orthodoxy and thereby threaten to prevent a relevant encounter between the Christian faith and the modern period. However, if we take the factor of historicity seriously, this will initiate a revision of the understanding of authority. Whether this revision takes place in accordance with the Christian faith obviously will depend upon the whole theological view. And this view does not automatically grow out of the historical work, even though it cannot grow without it or against it. As a matter of fact, however, in a negative respect the rational judgment, which is constitutive for the method, and the theological judgment converge. The Bible, according to its own meaning, does not permit us to claim its authority for everything. And even in respect to its proper meaning, the Bible does not demand an external-formal authority, but rather exerts an authority that procures its own validity and therefore implies the evidence. The task of theological judgment is to determine positively the sphere and efficacy of biblical authority, and that means we have to articulate what the fundamental theme of the Bible is and its specific mode of conviction. In this way we gain criteria for the suitable use of biblical texts.

## VI. *The Question of Understanding*

Therewith, the question of understanding has been raised, which forces us to account for the relation of the Christian faith to reality and for the intrinsic truth of faith itself. An understanding of the concern of the Christian faith cannot occur if we carelessly overlook that which imposes itself as real upon our rational perception. This statement raises a number of problems and needs to be explained. Yet it cannot be definitively settled by means of an explanation. The comprehension of reality and truth occurs within a continuing struggle which never permits the issue of understanding to come to an end or allows it to be beyond dispute. The history of Christianity and, in particular, of theology itself provided us with more than enough examples of this fact.

Because the means of coming to agreement (perceptions, concepts, modes of argumentation, etc.) are determined by different presuppositions of understanding, these means often complicate the process of coming to agreement if not make it impossible. For this reason, within such a broad problem-horizon the task of coming to agreement is so difficult and often appears so hopeless. If we take a statement out of the linguistic context and framework of understanding to which it belongs, and then

abruptly transplant it into another "interpretive context" and judge it accordingly, then misunderstandings necessarily arise. We entangle ourselves deeper in these misunderstandings, the more we talk at cross purposes to one another. One starts from a concept of reason which from the first is determined by its opposition to faith. Another insists that when language is at stake, even when it concerns faith, perception and understanding must occur and be promoted, that is, "reason" and "understanding" are involved. If we realize that there has often been a deficiency of the necessary thought-discipline, and that because of unconscious volitional drives and imaginative powers, the genuine willingness to come to agreement has been curtailed, it will become clear to us how much patience and self-critical reserve is necessary within the area of the question of understanding.

There is a wide gulf, which appears unbridgeable, between what the technical-rational domination of the world understands and acknowledges as reality, and what Christian faith confesses as reality. In the former case, the concept of reality is, from the outset, so determined that God cannot be considered, at any rate not "objectively" in the sense of experiential and calculable objectivity. At best God can be "subjectively" considered in the sense of an objectifiable human conception, however interpreted. In contrast, the Christian faith is completely dependent upon whether our talk about God bears a relation to reality that is beyond technical-rational competence, and yet, at the same time, is also relevant for this approach to reality because it concerns man, the same man who is the presupposition of the technical-rational domination of the world. Therefore, it is misleading if one polarizes the conflict concerning the understanding of reality into the duality of technical rationality and Christian faith. The *humanum*, which is frequently in tension with technical rationality, reveals itself in different ways and gives rise to the conflict over the understanding of reality. This conflict, and not the abstracted understanding of reality that is characteristic for the technical-rational mastery of the world, concerns the Christian faith.

The mentality of the era when the church existed within a closed ecclesiastical world not only has had strong after-effects upon the efforts in the modern period respecting the theological issue of understanding, but also has perpetrated a traditional habit of mind that is difficult to overcome. For this mentality both the earthly and the heavenly, this world and the world beyond, exist in metaphysical continuity. Because God is the cause and the goal of all things, God is also considered to be the beginning and the end of all physical causality. The world borders on God. By forging to its boundaries, the world can thereby be transcended to God. The earthly world continues into the heavenly world — although through a qualitative upheaval. And in the same way chronological, computable time with its marginal boundaries,

original-time and end-time, is interposed into a likewise temporally conceived, but qualitatively distinct eternity. Therewith, of course, the understanding of reality in a Christianized metaphysic is grasped only at one point. The wealth and depth of this kind of metaphysical thinking does not thereby come into view. Nevertheless, a fundamental structural factor has been indicated. We need only consider the significance which the understanding of space and time has for the understanding of reality in general, and the importance the concepts of space and time receive when mythical concepts and salvation-history statements from the biblical tradition are integrated within a metaphysical understanding of reality. The importance, but also the momentous problematic of such a way of thinking can be seen most clearly in the traditional dogmatic treatment of the doctrine of the resurrection.

But that does not mean that the trivial, depreciatory speaking about metaphysics, which has become accepted in Protestant theology, is therefore to be justified. We cannot escape the underlying problems. Today they only reappear in different forms. And we scarcely do justice to these problems if we do not take into account their traditional interpretation. That which was, under other historical conditions, a possible and to some extent even necessary form of reflection upon the Christian faith has, because of the changed intellectual context, forfeited its direct usefulness. Moreover, if the traditional metaphysical way of thinking is suddenly combined with the modern physical understanding of reality, it can no longer be truly understood but is perverted into meaninglessness. Then we miss both together: not only a responsible contemporary understanding of the Christian faith, but also a helpful historical comprehension of the traditional understanding of faith.

A few observations will serve as further points of orientation for this boundless problematic. Thoughtful evaluation can hardly question the fundamental justification of these observations. Their advantages and restrictions consist in the fact that, as soon as we examine them in detail, they open a large latitude for different conceptions.

Because faith originates in the proclaimed word and expresses itself in the confessing word, it cannot be without understanding. The necessity of this relationship between faith and understanding should not, because of its diverse stratification, be called into question. On the one hand, faith presupposes understanding; on the other hand, it also produces understanding. In part, faith establishes understanding in order to confirm it and deepen it; in part, faith shatters understanding and then establishes it anew. Indeed, faith is concerned with that which goes beyond all understanding, yes, which even runs contrary to reason, in as much as reason is always subservient to alien powers. This does not constitute an exception to the principle that faith and under-

standing are dependent upon one another. In no way does faith contrary to all experience contradict the experiential reference of faith. Only because faith exercises its nature in the medium of understanding and experience can antagonism occur. Such antagonism by no means implies unrelatedness. What the essential relationship is, will have to be carefully considered, for there are very different types of antitheses. Faith is obviously different from irrationality and superstition. To what extent and for what purpose faith stands in antithesis to and yet at the same time endorses reason is a useful deliberation. A great deal of offense caused by negligence and lack of conscientiousness with respect to thought and language, is admittedly passed off as the necessary offense of faith. But really it only indicates a lack of faith and love and promotes unbelief and hate.

We cannot choose the intellectual situation in which we find ourselves. If we isolate ourselves in the issues of faith from the unavoidable conditions of experience and understanding in our own time, faith will inevitably suffer and languish away. If faith is hampered in its encounter with the world and mankind, it will lose the necessary resistance with which it must engage itself if it is to unfold its truth and power. This in no way implies, as some have shortsightedly inferred, a blind acceptance of the modern understanding of reality. This is already contradicted by the fact that there is no undisputed unity concerning the modern understanding of reality. Whoever really wishes to involve himself in the modern understanding of reality, must participate responsibly in the discussion concerning it. Negative or positive wholesale judgments only indicate prejudices which hardly suit the freedom that comes from faith. We must distinguish between particular incontestable and irrevocable truths of the modern period and an abundance of contested interpretations, neglected insights, and striking confusions. The use of oversimplified catchwords in such a situation can only degrade the Christian faith to an ideology.

If we wish to carry out the transformation of Christian thought without detriment to it, we cannot disregard the following circumstance. The uniformity of the technical-rational domination of the world corresponds, in a surprising but not accidental way, with a vast and rapidly changing plurality of thought-patterns in respect to the meaning of *humanum*. Because of this, our period lacks common basic concepts that enable us to come to agreement concerning those experiences of reality which cannot be comprehended by means of the technical-rational understanding of reality, and which at best can only be distorted by such an understanding. In this respect, theology participates in the intellectual fate of its time. It not only must face this linguistic plurality in those spheres which stand over against it, but it also must experience and endure it within its own work. Because of this we are not permitted to elevate to a permanent norm the uniformity of thought which,

under other circumstances, was supported by cultural factors, but which cannot make demands upon theology in a situation in which these presuppositions are lacking. Neither should we complain, nor should we carelessly content ourselves with this change in respect to the ability to form a consensus of faith. For it is not only the duty of theology to prevent linguistic confession within Christendom. For its own part theology must also help see to it that in the general public sphere agreement is promoted by the conscientious handling of language. The effort towards understanding has as its goal the comprehension and representation of the Christian faith as convincing truth. The reality to which faith refers, to which it clings, and which it shares, verifies itself as real by making its claim upon man and effectively touching him in the life-experience which is to be expected by every man. The reference of faith to reality comes into its own as a process of illumination that teaches us to make distinctions in respect to reality. And this happens as an event which transforms reality.

Common mistakes and suspicions can thus be corrected. It is likewise absurd to want to justify faith's essential interest in reality by means of isolation or a leveling process. In the former case, one establishes a "special" reality without relationship to the experience of reality that can be expected of every man. In the latter case, one seeks to reduce everything to the level of that which is already recognized as self-evident. In both cases, the event of distinguishing is lost, since such an event always implies the bringing about of relationships. Then the Christian faith forfeits its characteristic content. Faith appears as something through which nothing new occurs, but rather everything remains as it was.

If we do not consider the factors of the modern period adequately, then we are led into that state of confusion concerning the understanding of reality in respect to theology which makes discussion so exasperating and frustrating. One seeks to escape a narrow understanding of reality in a way that nevertheless keeps him unknowingly imprisoned by it. In the proper effort to affirm the assertions of the Christian faith over against a secularism that reduces the contents of faith to mere psychic realities, one claims the essential content of faith to be "objective" reality. But in such a way one does not do justice to faith. The mere antithesis remains committed to a pattern of thinking that falsifies that which was possibly intended and gives birth to misunderstanding. Thus one becomes a victim of the law of his opponent and attempts to counter secularistic positivism with his own theologically transposed positivism. Such a discussion can only become meaningful if we explain what meaning of reality we claim for "the objective" in distinction to scientific objectifiability, for asserted "facts" in distinction to what can be historically or experimentally ascertained, for the stressed "externality" in distinction to the spatial-physical external world.



The polemical demarcation against "subjectivism" and "anthropological narrowness" is no compensation. By doing this we still remain uncritical prisoners of the same way of thinking that we actually wish to overcome. Theology, to its own detriment, has for decades contended against "subjectivism," "inwardness," "individualism," and the like, without recognizing within these justifiably criticized phenomena the concealed moments of truth and without trying to express these moments with appropriate conceptuality. For this reason even those theological views that contend against theological "objectivism" and its vague understanding of reality are not exempt from confusion. The catchword "existentialist interpretation" is, to be sure, as every person of competence knows, grossly misinterpreted if we categorize it under the Feuerbachian dissolution of theology into anthropology. But this misinterpretation is undoubtedly promoted by thoughtlessness and mischief resulting from misuse of the term "existentialist interpretation." This includes, as an extreme, the situation where one much too cheaply yields to the slogan "God is dead" and renounces the word "God" altogether. And because one obviously does not wish to retreat into "subjectivism" and "inwardness," one seeks to verify the Christian faith within the scope of social and ethical reality.

What the reality of God is, actually can only be understood when it becomes clear to what extent the reality of God concerns the being of man as man. The suspicion that in this way God would become dependent upon man originates from a concept of reality which supposes that everything is comprehended in its true reality only when man places himself over against it as a distant observer. It is evident that this would be a contradiction in itself in respect to God. The foregoing suspicion turns everything upside down. If the reality of God can only be understood as an efficacious being that concerns man in his humanity, then man is precisely thereby posited as one who is absolutely dependent upon God. It is not necessary for our talk of God to express this dependence directly. Talk of God can consist in pure statements about God's being, let us say, in the form of doxology. But it would not be understood as talk of God, if it would not be heard as talk that concerns man in his humanity.

Whoever says "God" negates the assumption that God is something which can be appended to man. Just as all talk of man constantly comprehends him in regard to particular aspects and relations, so the same is true for theological talk of man. Indeed, such talk makes the claim that it concerns man in terms of that which is absolutely constitutive for the being of man, and yet which is not man himself. For we can only talk of man in truth, when we talk not only of man. Therefore it would be good for theology if we would avoid any understanding of the term

anthropology that is oriented to a separated talk of man. For man has his being only before God (*coram Deo*).

What this means for the understanding of reality in the issue of the Christian faith would be lost if we, in our talk of man, disregarded the social and the historical reference as well as the natural context of the being of man, that is, if we disregarded man's reference to the world. The being before God can be asserted and experienced as constitutive for the being of man only in respect to the breadth and multiplicity of these relations through which it is mediated and yet from which it is distinct. Thus two basic points of view are closely interrelated. The reality of God, and thus man's own reality, is perpetually distorted for man. Consequently, he cannot come to truth without the transmission of truth. The former implies that even though God is perpetually with man, man is still perpetually God-less. He can be put right only by God's coming to man and thus enabling him properly to distinguish between God and world. The latter point implies that the talk of God is not a matter of invention and discovery, but is derived from listening to the message of historical experience. And further, it is a matter of experience that just this transmission of truth and not another one illuminates and verifies itself in man's conscience.

The great themes of the Christian witness to faith are to be expounded, as I have pointed out, in regard to their relations to reality. They all meet in one concern: to restore man through faith. Faith means to bring together everything which is not God, in a way appropriate to God, into connection with God. It means to refuse to acknowledge anything in the way it appears without regard to God, but to accept it as what it is before God. Faith confesses that the world, in part and as a whole, is the creation of God, that man even in his highest potential is still at last burdened by guilt and lost, and that the sinner in his godlessness is accepted and affirmed by God. Faith confesses the temporal life to be the presence of eternity, dying to be a being handed over to the God who raises the dead. And finally, legitimizing all of this and including it in itself, faith confesses Jesus in his submission even unto the powerlessness on the cross as the one sent from God and exalted to God, as God's own authoritative Word in person. The restoration which thereby occurs, so that the most important, the first, commandment, gains priority, namely, that we through faith let God be God and work as God, changes life by altering its orientation. Amidst the confusion of voices making claims and promises we will understand what the ultimate concern of life is, as it compels us to faith in Jesus Christ. Among the multitude of possibilities and necessities for human action love for our fellow-man will decide what really matters, since the certainty of being loved by God liberates our doing from all illusions. During the life-long struggle against the power of unbelief in the form of false

security or despair that appears all too justified, hope arises that in the end the unequivocalness of God's promise will triumph over the ambiguity of life.

## VII. *The Freedom of Faith and Responsibility for the World*

The Christian faith affirms responsibility for the world. The subject matter which is thus raised would be distorted if, from the outset, we restricted it to an ethical issue alone. It has been customary to deal with this issue either in such a way that the thematic of faith is completed by the ethical view, so that responsibility for the world can only be first perceived in moral action; or in such a way that the perception of responsibility for the world through action is set over against an individualistically restricted understanding of faith (and if necessary also over against a corresponding understanding of morality) in order to determine and limit the meaning of faith to that which can be verified in practice. Accordingly, faith as such appears to have an inherent or at least a dangerous tendency to withdraw from the world, that is, to negate the world and to escape from the world, to turn to the world beyond or to the inner world. In reaction to actual mistakes, but at the same time with the tendency towards new mistakes, the relevance of faith to the world is frequently today emphasized and interpreted in such a way that it has become simply identified with the tasks of political action, for which, moreover, a particular sociological theory then is made normative.

We will only do justice to the comprehensive significance of faith's affirmation of responsibility for the world, however, if we recognize the polar condition of tension which determines the relation of the Christian faith to the world. The freedom of faith which liberates us in our relationship to the world has a twofold meaning, namely, freedom *from* the world and freedom *for* the world. The freedom from the world which arises when the liberating Word of God is received should not be negatively characterized as a loss of relation to the world. The believer recognizes himself as one who stands before God. Since he is absolutely dependent upon God, he is ultimately responsible to God alone and, in reference to Jesus Christ, is exclusively indebted to God. However, this being before God is only truly perceived when it does not exist *alongside* his being in the world. Rather, his being before God must include his being in the world, and for that he must answer responsibly before God. Faith exists at all only in the same measure as it is confronted with our experience of the world and allows this experience to be confronted by God. The verb *verantworten* in my native German is suggestive for our understanding here. It can mean "to answer for" or "to account for" or "to be responsible for." Therefore, if we do not limit it to the narrow sense of moral responsibility, but in the broad meaning



of that about which man must give an account (account-ability), about which he is questioned and to which he must give an answer (answer-ability), then we can say: faith answers responsibly (response-ability) for the world before God. This encompasses the entire scale of prayer: praise and thanksgiving, intercession and adoration, confession of sins as well as the certainty of reconciliation and redemption. For the one who recognizes the world in the light of what it means before God, the powers that claim to rule the world are exposed as vain and destroyed. He himself in faith participates in God's lordship over the world. Overcoming the world is therefore united with an affirmation of the world that is appropriate to God. The traditional way of talking about two worlds covers up this fact if we thereby misunderstand them as being in unrelated juxtaposition, instead of interpreting them as expressing the struggle that exists within our world before God.

The thusly understood world-responsibility of faith occurs, however, as responsibility *before* the world and *for* the world. This does not mean that freedom from the world is restricted or nullified by freedom for the world. On the contrary, freedom from the world is to be realized in freedom for the world. This freedom for the world consists in the courage to answer responsibly to God before the world. Thus, being sent into the world is the direct result of the freedom of faith: we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Responsibility before the world is as such responsibility for the world, even when it arouses contradiction and hostility in the world. Without such contradiction and hostility, the responsibility of faith before the world cannot take place at all as responsibility for the world. That the responsibility of faith nevertheless benefits the world is valid in two respects. As faith responsibly answers to God as the Father of Jesus Christ before the world, freedom from the world is made possible. The proclamation of the Lordship of God is the message of salvation to the world and at the same time the dawn of the end of a lost world. For the salvation of the world is that which allows the world to be reconciled with God, in such a way that the world is rightly acknowledged as world and God as God. But this orientation towards that which is last and final, that is, the salvation of the world in its strictest sense, does not ignore that which is valid only in a limited and conditional way, that is, that which is provisional, that which serves the welfare of a lost world. The faith that overcomes the world does not commit itself to the powers that destroy the world, but manifests its freedom for the world as it works for the preservation of the world. It does not avoid the burden of actively sharing the responsibility for the world and the suffering that arises out of both the unavoidable discord concerning world-responsibility and the consequences of an often irresponsible seizure of world-responsibility.

### *VIII. The Proper Exercise of World-Responsibility*

The right understanding and adequate maintenance of Christian responsibility for the world depends on the proper correlation of overcoming the world and preserving the world, of the salvation of the world and the welfare of the world. Both are grounded in the proper correlation of freedom from the world and for the world. If we tear apart that which belongs together and combine indiscriminately that which must be held distinct, then symptoms of sickness and decay come to a head in the life of Christianity. For this reason, the Reformation emphatically enjoined, as a fundamental rule, the proper correlation between faith and works in the doctrine of law and Gospel, of the twofold use of the law, and of the differentiation of the two kingdoms, in order to demarcate the Christian faith from various types of fanaticism. Of course, even this fundamental rule does not automatically protect us against its misuse through lack of judgment. If it is used to justify the establishment, then it is also serving a form of fanaticism — in this case, traditionalism. Therefore, it is not enough to appeal to it abstractly. If we wish to use it properly, we must reflect upon the historical circumstances.

In the period of the early church, Christendom was able to maintain in a very impressive way responsibility for the world in a twofold respect: by a world-wide proclamation of the faith that overcomes the world as well as by a participation in the task of preserving the world. Indeed, by this participation, the church became the decisive factor in the preservation of the world. The fact that the eschatologically oriented primitive Christianity became historically established and adapted itself to the cultural and political forces of the declining antiquity frequently has been considered a contradiction and judged either as an abominable apostasy or as an unavoidable transformation. Even though this exceedingly complex process raises a multitude of questions, we must still in principle affirm as correct the fact that responsibility for the world was maintained in a twofold way, namely, in the freedom of faith the early church involved itself in the service of preserving the world; but it did so without confusing the preservation of the world with that which is necessary for the salvation of the world.

I admit that there are important questions to raise in respect to the manner in which this development took place. For example, whether thereby the understanding of faith as freedom *from* the world and the understanding of the freedom *for* the world that results from it were truly maintained; or, further, whether the responsibility for the world through the proclamation of the Gospel and through political engagement was realized in the correctly differentiated way that is appropriate to Christian faith. Even if we carefully consider this development in the light of its

particular historical circumstances and do not, by any means, dismiss the era of the closed ecclesiastical world that emerged from it as a deformity, we are still impressed by the fact that Christendom was in danger of being destroyed by its own success in the world. By perceiving its responsibility for the world Christianity produced a world-situation in which the mission to the world appeared to become one with the confinement within this world-situation, and one could scarcely distinguish anymore the interest in the preservation of the world from the interest in the preservation of that particular world-situation.

The specifics of Christian responsibility for the world had to become completely obscured when the closed ecclesiastical world approached its disintegration in culture and society and yet remained determinative for the life-forms of the church as well as for the concept of that which was Christian. Christianity in its conformity with a closed ecclesiastical world now found itself in conflict with the task of responsibility for the world. The extreme solutions for this situation have been either an ecclesiastical retreat with practically complete abandonment of responsibility for the world or a secularizing and politicizing of Christianity in the name of an understanding of world-responsibility that does not emerge out of the Christian faith itself. In the former solution the word "Christian" is of course equated with the word "conservative." The latter solution implies that the Christian faith only has a justified existence when it understands itself as progressive and revolutionary and acts accordingly.

If we want to free the discussion from irrelevant motives and uncontrolled emotions and transfer it into an atmosphere of thoughtful reflection, then we must proceed from the fact that the always easily violated integrity of the Christian world-responsibility is to a high degree endangered by the historical conditions which are given as a result of the detachment from the era of the closed ecclesiastical world. We must recognize the fact that, due to the interwovenness of Christianity with a world-situation of the past, problems arise, especially concerning its world-responsibility, which will cause in any case sensitive reactions.

It is not enough to demand that we disentangle that which is Christian from its obsolete historical forms, even though this is imperative within certain boundaries. Certainly it is the nature of Christian freedom to move out of its comfortable lodgings when it is necessary, if they hinder it from taking responsibility for the world. The necessity of permanent reformation arises not only because of obvious errors and faulty developments, but also because of the possibility that, in consequence of the changing times, that which was once reliable fails, and established forms of life either suffocate or only simulate life itself. But it would be an illusion even in times of greatest chaos to think that we could win the freedom that enables Christian responsibility for the world by

means of a once-and-for-all emancipation from tradition. That which sets us free cannot be had without our being intensively attentive to tradition. And it would be a miserable example of responsibility for the world if Christians handle their own historical heritage, and to be sure not only the transmitted texts but also the orders and institutions that have been handed down, in a way that disregards responsibility for history. This means that we cannot summarily disentangle ourselves from the era of the closed ecclesiastical world, but rather must proceed from case to case, subjecting each case to careful scrutiny.

The task of disentanglement, even when it is provided with the necessary restriction, needs to be supplemented by the task of integration. The catchword "disentanglement" can not only bind us to a foolish desire for a new beginning from the point of naught, but also to an attitude of pious-like resignation which avoids world-responsibility altogether, either by withdrawing into a private domain or by surrendering to an apocalyptic mood which disregards world-responsibility through an impressive world-view that nevertheless leads only to superficial and deceptive judgments. The temptation would be then short-sightedly and presumptuously to welcome the end of the so-called Constantinian era, without being conscious of the mammoth tasks that have appeared with the changed state of affairs. We would greatly oversimplify these tasks if we understood them with a sigh of relief as the alleged end of a mistaken development. Rather, we are challenged to the task of a new integration. The historical range of this task can only be compared with the problems that were placed upon the early church. And because our task must deal with a new integration, we dare not forget that we cannot carry on an historical process that began two thousand years ago. What must take place in this task cannot be achieved by organizing or demonstrating. We need to discover once again the deep, hidden, nonmanipulatable processes, in order to unlock those powers which enable us to perceive anew the Christian responsibility for the world and thereby to integrate the freedom of faith with history in such a way that the freedom of faith itself is not lost in the process.

### *IX. Some Spheres of World-Responsibility*

Naturally, the reference to that which is not at our disposal does not dispense us from engaging ourselves both diagnostically and therapeutically with the symptoms of the contemporary crisis regarding Christian world-responsibility. By way of example, let us consider some of the phenomena which today are understandably the center of discussion and agitation.

The language of proclamation finds itself for the most part still under the grip of an ecclesiastical language which, due to lack of interpretation, rather hinders than encourages faith's contemporary

world-responsibility. Here the situation is certainly not helped by borrowing fashionable jargon. Authoritative language does not grow out of cosmetic corrections of the vocabulary, but out of a renewed experience of the matter. One criterion for responsible talk of God is not the least this: whether it makes possible a coming to agreement as well as a new united affirmation, and whether, therein, that which is fundamentally Christian remains recognizable.

The traditional forms of proclamation, above all, the sermon, must be examined to see whether they do justice to the contemporary state of consciousness or whether they are stamped by different cultural presuppositions. To dismiss them with the stereotype "authoritarian power structures" only indicates a consideration that is not very thorough or original. New experiments with other forms of worship are undoubtedly to be welcomed, if one is judicious and does not consider every shocking fancy worthy of realization.

The ministry in its traditional form is a classic example in regard to the after-effects that stem from the era of the closed ecclesiastical world. Here reforms are a burning necessity. Nevertheless, it is short-sighted to blame the institution as such for every failure, without asking whether or not the cause of the failure, as is so often the case, is rooted in some other place. We dare not allow ourselves to become blinded by justified, or even exaggerated, criticism to the possibilities that still exist for the ministry to exercise world-responsibility with extraordinary freedom (in comparison with most other vocations) insofar as one is concerned at all about being responsible as a Christian for the world.

It is clear that, together with the ministry, the traditional structure and organization of the local congregation and the broader church government still bear the character of earlier phases in church history. This situation has given rise to a need for a more comprehensive self-examination on the part of the church. However, in giving particular attention to individual aspects, such as church and state, infant baptism, church taxation, spiritual conduct, and the like, we must be careful that we neither lose sight of the degree to which the problems are interwoven nor lose our sense of proportion regarding what can be accomplished by individual efforts.

The sociological question, which also is present within the aforementioned issues, reduces itself to the disturbing suspicion that Christendom may be so entangled with an earlier world-situation that it cannot do anything else but justify the sociological structures of the past and oppose any attempt for change. The symbiosis of Christianity with feudalism and later with the middle classes actually provides us with enough depressing evidence. However, in respect to the history of Christianity as a whole, it would do violence to posit these incontestably faulty developments as absolute and then to assert that Christianity is irreparably tied

to a particular structure of society. It would still be much less convincing to consider the here existing problem solved by a mere social-political change of position, which would appear beyond criticism just because it is allied for the moment with the stronger side. That would not be an authentic counter-position to the rightly censured "sins of the fathers." Neither would it make sufficiently clear what Christian responsibility for the world based on freedom means.

The understanding of moral conduct is very closely connected with the social relationships. It has become a commonplace among critics both inside and outside the church that Christianity still more or less passes off the morality and common sense of an earlier period as contemporary moral postulates. In fact, partly because of bitter experiences and partly because of changes in the conditions of life that cannot be retracted, it has become necessary to reconsider ethics in a more comprehensive way: in relation to the issue of peace and the problem of revolution, or to questions of economics and technology, or to problems of sexual ethics. Regardless of how progressive he may be, a person has underestimated the need for reconsidering ethics if he believes all too quickly and all too certainly that he knows everything or if he does not incorporate the multitude of necessary particulars from the most diverse branches of knowledge or incorporates only that which pleases him. This is even more true if he does not realize that insisting on isolated problems and decisions in ethical issues is not a guarantee for recognizing the ethical phenomenon itself.

Contemporary Christendom needs to be shaken from its sleep in regard to responsibility for the world. But we shall fail to accomplish this if we do not place that which constitutes world-responsibility in an appropriate relationship with Christian faith, rather than equating such responsibility with some external political program and then making it the standard for Christianity's right to existence. For one extreme among the contemporary Christian positions, world-responsibility has been allowed to degenerate into a mere propagandizing pretension of the Christian witness in its supposedly unchangeable form, particularly within the inner-church struggle. Thus, neither the Christian word nor Christian action is considered in regard to the contemporary world-situation in the way that is appropriate to faith, and, consequently, Christian responsibility for the world is neglected. As a result, the real concern of the Christian faith is obscured. For the other extreme, however, the danger of a narrow understanding in respect to world-responsibility threatens to make it almost impossible any more to establish a relationship to the Christian faith. Actually, what remains is only a legalistic moralism. The Word, from which faith lives, is disdained. No one has the slightest idea of what the real concern of faith is. There is a deficiency of knowledge and experience. One perhaps still calls himself,

confusedly or even cynically, a theologian. But the subject of theology is lost.

The task of preserving the world means to structure the world so that the welfare of humanity will be served in the best possible way. Whatever world-wide political tasks arise in respect to this should indeed be the concern of every Christian. But the Christian has no Christian program of his own to supply. Rather, he must adhere to the judgment of reason. All goals and means of establishing a better world must accordingly be examined. Whether revolution represents that which in our contemporary world is the *ultima ratio* for the preservation of the world is a problem which must be considered, and which should not be excluded *a limine* from the discussion. In any case, it must be considered with a conscientiousness and vigilance that is appropriate to the spirits which the slogan "revolution" evokes, even when some try to make it inoffensive. But regardless of what the political necessity may be, this will be modified for the Christian in the following way: He will say, "No," to all forms of fanaticism and will keep himself free from ideologies and the frenzy of illusions. With this attitude of sobriety he will combine an openness that is willing to listen, a sense of dedication that is prepared to stand by the weak, and a modesty that recognizes its own limits. All of this belongs to that which is truly reasonable and which, at the same time, can be counted as the fruits of faith. Being conscious of this, the Christian can look upon his responsible participation in political issues as something which only indirectly is the concern of the Christian faith. For strictly and properly speaking, the concern of the Christian faith is for the salvation of the world and only indirectly for the welfare of the world. Whoever surrenders this distinction and therewith the primacy of faith, not only brings that which is Christian into disarray but endangers also the political situation.

### X. *A Final Comment*

The confusion in which Christianity finds itself today could have the menacing appearance of hopelessness taken from it if we could agree concerning that which basically is self-evident. The neuralgic points upon which this discussion has concentrated, namely, the use of the Bible, the understanding of the reality of faith, and the Christian perception of what it means to be responsible for the world, have been perverted into pet themes of various factional groups, who have played off their interests against the interests of others, thus corrupting their own interests. The members of one group consider themselves the protectors of the Bible and tradition, others consider themselves the advocates of understanding, and still others see themselves as the champions of responsibility for the world. When each one of us feels himself compelled to take into consideration the indivisible whole, then

perhaps, because we have come closer to one another, our coming to grips with one another will obtain a new degree of intensity. But then it will also be more to the point.

My attempt here has been to accomplish one thing: to help us come to agreement in the church and in theology. Everything that has been said, whether indirectly, unclearly, or contestably, as well as the great amount that has remained unsaid, can then confidently be placed in other hands for further discussion.



# The Poiesis of Place

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The only thing to do with a parable is to tell it and hope for the miracle of ears to match the tongue.\* So I repeat a parable from Thoreau's *Walden*, and hope.

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtledove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken to concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers have little confidence in miracles; literary critics have less, theologians even less. So I shall say a little more, which may be a way of abandoning hope.

## *Of Time, Space, and Distraction*

I make my meditation on a hermeneutic of place: how things are placed, how we are placed with them, and how this mutual positioning comes into understanding. I do so with the help of Henry David Thoreau. He understood distraction from time and distraction in space in order to be placed: what he called "fronting a fact." Before coming to the heart of the matter, that "fronting of fact," it may be useful to linger over the phrases "distraction from time" and "distraction in space" and set them in an updated American context.

Thoreau expressed his sense of distraction from time by saying that "time is but a stream I go a-fishin in." Commonly we express

\*This essay, written for the Michalson Festschrift, has appeared in the *Journal of Religion*, vol. 53 (1973), pp. 36-47. It is reprinted by permission.

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 15 ("Economy"). There are many editions of *Walden*. Perhaps the reader will be assisted in locating quotations from *Walden* if I add, following the page reference in the Modern Library edition, a parenthesis containing the chapter title.

that sense by saying that we are killing time. To kill time is to be on holiday from ordinary time, the time of successive duration; it is to live in the reverie of time. When one moves in another rhythm than that of accustomed duration, lives in a story different from fated narration, he makes large drafts on an ideal time which may be either essentially negative or positive. If essentially negative, the reverie of time bounces off durational time: that is, its point of departure is the negation of durational time. If essentially positive, the reverie of time aspires to a primordial or mythological Time (as with Eliade) from which there would need be no distraction, no "time off." In either case, although in different senses, there is distraction from durational time.

One speaks comfortably of killing time but not of killing space. The reasons for that are doubtless complex, as the reasons for doing something simply and naturally are invariably complex. The fundamental reason, at least so I wish to entertain as a thesis, is that in the reverie of time and in the reverie of space distraction serves quite different functions. One is distracted *from* time, but *in* space. *Distraction within space is constitutive of the apprehension and understanding of things in place and of ourselves with them.* It is my task in what follows to unpack this claim. But for now, we do not understandingly apprehend things in mere space, although we do apprehend them in space and not outside it, either negatively or aspiringly. We apprehend things understandingly in *place*, which is a distraction in space. One might say that a thing in place is "spaced out." Distracted from the space of a mere *this*, it is also, without ceasing to be this, a *that* and *more*: it is the function of being put in place for *reference* to be established, since it is in place that a thing is first "really" expressed. That says, in short hand, that things have their place in metaphor, that placement is incorrigibly metaphorical. If there are no springs of natural poetry at the headwaters of human sensibility, nature withers under a most unnatural sun. Of that "old affair with the sun" and the "encroachment of that old catastrophe," Wallace Stevens (*the* contemporary Thoreauvian!) has limned many a line in latter days and made us feel its heat in our members.

Before speaking of the time sense and the space sense as they function typically in current American sensibility, let us give a nod to Kant. In his Transcendental Doctrine of Elements, Kant maintained that the sensible manifold yields no apprehension of time and space. Because they are the *a priori* forms of sensibility, space and time are constitutive of man's experience as such. Let us grant straightaway that Kant was insufficiently sensitive to the historicity of these forms, although he was likely as smart as his subsequent critics and thus doubtless knew that the space in which his Enlightenment contemporaries would apprehend things was Newtonian space.

Are we latter-day Americans any more sensitive to what ticks within us with regard to time and space, not to mention the tics

that show in our faces? It seems to me that in contemporary America there are two cultures of sensitivity, of sensibility.

The dominant one, the middle-class Anglo-American culture, lives all but exclusively in goal-oriented, hard-driving, durational time. For these, even space is measured in time: thirty minutes to Los Angeles, two man-hours to displace a ton of coal. For the most part, they are never distracted *from* time, even in time off, but rather are distracted in time if at all. Their time form is a secularized residue of Puritan-Evangelical time, the New Time verging on End Time. Forgotten, however, is the other half of Puritan New Creation, the New Place.

There is an intellectual riposte to this preoccupation with teleologically durational time: Rubenstein scorns an "overheated history," Eliade promotes a primordial "defense against time," and our students book travel to the timeless East. More interesting, to my mind, is the less than merely intellectual but more than merely emotive response to these issues by those in the current counterculture (or what one wag has called "the under-the-counter culture"). In seemingly utter distraction from what time has come to, they seek to come into the New Place. And they do so blissfully ignorant that this New Place resonates with something primal in American origins. If the current passion for the environment in the counterculture is more than a fad, that will owe to its having got back to the headwaters of the *poiesis* of place, to the springs and the experience of origins.

### *"Fronting a Fact" and the Experience of Origins*

We recalled just now that, for Kant, space, together with time, is a form through and in which man experiences what there is to experience. Discriminating three humanizing activities of mind — the theoretical, the practical, and the aesthetic — he restricted the analysis of space and time to the first. From that, one would assume either (1) the adequacy of that analysis to account for the experience of time and space in praxis and aesthetics as well, or (2) that it is necessary to develop a separate analysis of space and time for each of the remaining spheres of human activity, thus, for example, to speak of "moral space" or "aesthetic space," and so to construe these spaces as different from that of cognitive experience. The difficulty with executing the second assumption is that it undercuts the universal formality of space and time in reason as such. The difficulty with the first is that just that formality is made prescriptive for and regulative of moral and aesthetic experience in their spatial and temporal dimensions. That would yield a reductionism in which, for example, the irreversibility of time and the geometrics of extension are laid upon all experience whatsoever. But the poet discerns a coincidence of end and beginning and, seeing two things extended in the same place at

the same time, tells Leibniz with his identity of indiscernibles to bug off and take Kant with him.

It would not occur to Thoreau to join the argument on these terms. He would reject all options issuing from an analysis of space on a form-content model, since he would reject that model at the root. Things in *place* are not like a pencil in a drawer, a drawer in a table, a table in a room, a room in a house, a house in a lot, etc. To be sure, space is something like a form: it bounds. But when things are in place there in an internal and dialectical relation between that which extends and the bounding of extension. The *kind* of binding is relative to the *kind* of extending. One says of a commanding personal presence, with reason, "He fills the room." Thoreau complained of the smallness of his one-room house at Walden only in one connection. When guests came for serious talk they were so close together they could not speak low enough to be heard!<sup>2</sup> And, when a subject consumed them, they were forced back against the walls and thence to silence, since the boundaries stood inflexible against what was extending.

The term Thoreau *does* wish to enter is "fact," the term he uses interchangeably with the word "reality." Who would "make some progress toward settling in the world" will "stand right fronting a fact." Only so can I engage "the theme that seeks me, not I it."

One could wish Thoreau had substituted a more esoteric word or even a neologism. For latter-day Americans already know what a fact is. From Reconstruction days onward, or whenever it was that American reality became battened to industrial production, the reference of "fact" has occasioned no hesitation among users of ordinary language. A fact is what is finished, has reached its term, and lies there positivistically in the public view. As such, it can be walked around or taken up into the great compromise of facts that constitutes pragmatic experience. So when we try to bring Thoreau's "fact" into view, we are tyrannized by our rear-view mirror and the limitation of its reflective range.

There is a further difficulty. In polyglot English, we cannot "hear" the word *fact* growing out of its roots. Indeed, the fact we hear is one in which all growing has ceased: fact is *terminus ad quem*. Does that owe to there being no derivative English verb which shares a common root with "fact"? Fact obviously stems from Latin *facere*, to do or make. But English has no transitive verb to which fact is related in the way that, say, "deed" is related to "do." (One might think the phrase "facing the facts" an exception. But it is not, since "facing" in this sense has lost its memory of *facere*.)

We commonly have the result of Thoreau's meditation rather than the process of it. Whether he paused over the nuances of Latin *facere* for initial linguistic disposition to "fact" I cannot say, although it is certain that next to his love for American wilderness, or perhaps

2. *Ibid.*, p. 128 ("Visitors").

because of it, came classical Rome and Greece. At all events, there were nuances in *facere* which Thoreau brought forward in "fact." To "make" (*facere*) is not simply to fabricate (or manufacture) but to esteem the made, that is, to "make much of." To make is not simply to accomplish concludingly but to *exercise*. Thus, while *facere* also means shaping and forming, *factus* is not just a stuffed form, but a performance. For Thoreau, one could say, a fact is the center of performing art. And one could observe that, in not a few ancient tongues, the root meaning of "to make" or "to do" is to *place* (Greek, *tithenai*; Sanskrit, *dadhati*; Old Slavic, *deti*), so that to front a fact would be to be placed by what is in place, to come to belong to what belongs in the full range of its reference.

Let us turn now directly to the language in which Thoreau brings all this to expression. Men, for the most part, are located in fate, in *Atropos*, in space but without place, in space but without a way, a direction, or a sign.<sup>3</sup> (*Atropos*: without a turning, without deviation; without leaving this way for that way; without another direction—as a locomotive, on tracks, cannot be "distracted.") Most men are asleep, dreaming reality. To front a fact requires awaking; and, of course, sleep is the metaphor of atropic desperation. To awake is nothing less than to attain aureoreal consciousness and the experience of origins, to be present as the sun "instills and drenches the reality around us." Is that a time of day? Of course, and of course not. Morning is a time of day. But, "Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me."<sup>4</sup> Is that somewhere? Of course, and of course not. One awakens *from* the dreamed place, the atropic space. But, "Every man has to learn the points of the compass . . . as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction."<sup>5</sup> Thoreau did not assume that awaking of this sort was to be heard often in the yawnings of Concord. Indeed, he said he had never met a man who was quite awake. "How could I have looked him in the face?"<sup>6</sup>

The way to fronting a fact is thus marked by exertion and the artist's commitment to "carve and paint the very atmosphere through which we look." The matter is stated succinctly in one of *Walden's* most famous passages:

I wished to live deliberately . . . to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and . . . if it proved mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next

3. *Ibid.*, p. 107 ("Sounds").

4. *Ibid.*, p. 81 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For").

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55 ("The Village").

6. *Ibid.*, p. 81 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For").

excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it.<sup>7</sup>

The way to fronting fact is marked by exertion and deliberateness, because one can set out on that course only by chucking pre-disposing images.

Only an imagination appropriate to the performing art in the heart of fact will do. In explanation of his Spartan diet, Thoreau said he would not sit to a meal to which he could not belly up the imagination,<sup>8</sup> as though cooking were not a poetic before a chemical process.<sup>9</sup> And he remarked the passing strangeness of men who would pasture sheep in higher meadows than their imaginations.<sup>10</sup> So much as to say that, *for the mass of men, imagination is already defeated by atropic reality*. In the terms introduced earlier, average man is housed in atropic space without distraction, by reason of a received imagination that governs all things received. The Lewis and Clark of his own trail, however, is awakened from imaginative slumber by *distraction*: by the sense that yon impending fact cannot be scaled or plumbed with anything packed along for the purpose. Nothing perturbed Thoreau so much as the railroad tracks at the edge of Walden Pond and the dead Irishmen he took to be the ties supporting them. Only the distracted one can see that death which underlies the rapid and regular course. They who travel such tracks are always and only underway, never at the start of anything that could go several places, never have the experience of origins. They live, said he, "by some derivative old-country mode in this primitive new country."<sup>11</sup> They are still so in old Ireland, he sniffs with contempt, that they profane the pond by fishing with shiners!

The way to fronting fact — a way marked by a deliberate attentiveness occasioned by distraction from things as ordinarily taken, by that attentiveness that goes with "singing all the old ideas out of our heads" — is a way toward being bounded afresh. It is not that the nearer one approaches fact, the more open one is to supposing another or hypothetical case. No, one is opened to taking the case that *is*, or better, to *be taken* by the case that is, in the full range of its reference.<sup>12</sup> Once again, one is distracted from the themes he has been seeking and is opened to be found and bound by

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For").

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 193ff. ("Higher Laws").

9. *Ibid.*, p. 228 ("House Warming").

10. *Ibid.*, p. 79 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For").

11. *Ibid.*, p. 188 ("Baker Farm").

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 293-94 ("Conclusion"). "Let us not play at kittly-benders. There is a solid bottom everywhere. . . . Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the furring. Do not depend on the putty. Drive a nail home and clinch it . . . — a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse. So will help you God, and so only."

the theme seeking him. *To front a fact, then, is to be delivered into the initiative-stealing power of reality.* One can scarcely imagine a more compact interweaving of these matters than that which occurs in the passage with which Thoreau concludes the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For":

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamppost safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow. . . . Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.<sup>13</sup>

That is to say that we are *held into* the initiative-stealing power of reality.

If we have said enough about *the way to front a fact*, we have scarcely said enough about the reality that holds us into itself, that bounds what is bounding in our confrontation. "If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights. . . . If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets."<sup>14</sup> The reason for that, Thoreau puts in a simple formula, is that "reality is fabulous." A hint of what that means is already afforded in the sentence cited in the preceding lengthy passage: "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on *both* its surfaces . . . and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow."<sup>15</sup> This hint needs now to be followed out since it bears directly on our theme, how we are taken into things and placed by them.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For").

14. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

15. The emphasis is mine.

*"Tropos" and "Topos":  
Place as the Trope of Transcendence*

Although by trade a surveyor and an erstwhile grower of beans, Thoreau had no interest in topography or farming as such. For those preoccupied with boundaries in atropic space, his contempt was boundless, as was his disdain for the farmer who looked to fields only for what could be taken from them to market. Such a one would put his God on the block if he thought there were demand and the price were right.<sup>16</sup> "I have frequently seen a poet withdraw," he said, "having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rime, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk."<sup>17</sup>

So why *did* Thoreau grow beans? "I was determined," he said, "to know beans." And that not in the manner of today's devout organic gardener. "Some," he gave as his reason, "must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day."<sup>18</sup> Such work is not reserved to the field, however, but rather is executed wherever language is rightly in place. When he speaks of the chatter that goes on in the typically uninhabited house, he says, "It would seem as if the very language of our parlors would lose all its nerve and degenerate into *palaver* wholly, our lives pass at such remoteness from its symbols, and its metaphors and tropes are necessarily so farfetched, through slides and dumb-waiters, as it were; in other words, the parlor is so far from the kitchen and workshop. . . . As if only the savage dwelt near enough to Nature and Truth to borrow a trope from them. How can the scholar, who dwells away in . . . the Isle of Man, tell what is parliamentary in the kitchen?"<sup>19</sup>

We may state a conclusion, amplify it, and then illustrate it at random from Thoreau. *The poiesis of place is a process of fronting tropos in topos*: that is, a process of being held into the turnings of things in space so that we are bound by their reference — and thus freed from our own atropic way by being freshly positioned in place. When Thoreau said that "some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day," he did not have rhetoric, in the pejorative sense, in mind. For him, a trope is no decoration or embellishment of an otherwise plain truth; in Bushnell's phrase, no piece of mind-milliner's work to garnish a drab hat. Nor does "expression" serve a more felicitous language

16. Thoreau, p. 177 ("The Ponds").

17. *Ibid.*, p. 74 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For").

18. *Ibid.*, p. 146 ("The Bean-Field").

19. *Ibid.*, p. 220 ("House-Warming").



about what is already in hand and said. Neither enterprise could serve a parable maker. It is rather that in the trope and expression of a thing the seeds of parable are already planted in imaginative sensibility. It is the *tropos* of fact that extracts it from atropic space and places it, incipiently, in parabolic reference. Rightly to place a thing and be placed by it, to "front" it, is to discern its *turn*, direction, way (i.e., its trope): is to see how it affords entry to a world otherwise unannounced, undisclosed, unexpressed. "To give an object poetic space," says Gaston Bachelard, "is to give it more space than objectivity. . . . It is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being."<sup>20</sup> It is to give it and be given *place*, the trope of transcendence, so that two immensities touch intimately in an expansion of being for both.

We shall have got to fact, according to Thoreau, only if we face it as multifaceted. As a merely *topical* item, it stands there, just itself. Distracted from mere *topics*, we are invited to the thing in its *tropical* climate, to seeing it through the mist and steam as what he called "the germ of something more."<sup>21</sup> Thus, to have the initiative stolen from one is to be taken into that which the thing concentrates, symbolizes, adumbrates, brings to expression. However, such an entry does not afford quick and easy access to infinities. "Talk of heaven!" Thoreau explodes, "ye disgrace earth."<sup>22</sup> It is true that, fronting multifaceted fact, "the imagination dives deep and soars higher than Nature goes."<sup>23</sup> Fact and the imagination held into it in the *poiesis* of place yield the earth not as "a mere fragment of dead history . . . but living poetry." As much is evident in Thoreau's remarkable meditation on the leaf as an archetype of natural form, which concludes: "No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly."<sup>24</sup>

Thoreau does not ponder these themes discursively. Prose poet and reality fancier that he was, he preferred to be held concretely into Concord facts ("I have traveled a great deal in Concord") in their expressions and tropes: spinning now a parable for a French-Canadian woodchopper, now a gentle rebuke for Emerson over at Harvard College (where, he said, they teach all the branches of learning but none of the roots). One can, however, dip into *Walden* virtually at random and see how the themes coalesce.

Take the Pond itself. Thoreau knew about atropic space: he was a surveyor and could use the level and measuring chains. He was even curious that the Pond was widely considered to be bottomless. Still

20. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. xix ff.

21. Thoreau, p. 237 ("Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors").

22. *Ibid.*, p. 180 ("The Ponds").

23. *Ibid.*, p. 275 ("Conclusion").

24. *Ibid.*, p. 273 ("Conclusion").

within the "space" of that widespread opinion, he staked the dimensions of the Pond; and, from the slope of its shores, made projections regarding its depth. But the question of the depth of Walden Pond, at bottom, was not a mathematical problem. It was rather a problem of the imagination fronting a fact, a problem in the *poiesis* of place. It was the problem, as Bachelard would put the matter, of a space which holds the germ of an intimate immensity, of an immense intimacy. "What if all ponds were shallow?" Thoreau asks, "Would it not react on the minds of men?" No sooner had he finished the description of taking the measurements of Walden Pond than he went on to say that, as long as men believe in the infinite, some ponds will be thought bottomless. That is a proposition that converts: as long as ponds confront us as bottomless, there is the trope of infinity.

The *tropos* of Walden Pond expressed itself to Thoreau as the eye of the earth: as he looked into those depths, now truly bottomless, he had the sense of being looked at from the center of the earth. Watching, he was watched; something kept the watch, even while he slept in atropic desperation. He was "put in his place" by the glance of the cosmic aquatic eye and came to understand that the earth is "insular and not continent," that deep water is good for something other than keeping one's butter cool.

*Place*, whether of intimate immensity or of immense intimacy, goes together with what Bachelard calls *topophilia*. And it goes without saying that what one loves he protects against adverse forces. Thoreau could not watch with equanimity as the ice cutters came to Walden Pond, unheeding of its searching gaze. Who were they to rip off the outermost layer of the cornea of the eye of the earth! What, then, keepeth watch over New Israel and slumbers not? Who are these tree sawyers to lop off the eyelashes of the eye of the earth? What now will filter finite air into which the gaze of eternity is directed? Who are these farmers who build fences and till the eyebrows of the eye of the earth? What, now, will hold back the silt, that alluvion from Paris to Concord, through which we must muck our way to find the eye, if perchance it yet can see?

So the Sierra Club is right to take its motto from Thoreau: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." But it would help if the Sierra Club knew what this means. To be sure, if the lake goes, if it has no atropic space, it cannot come to expression in tropic place, cannot be fronted as multifaceted fact. But the reason there should not be beer cans at the bottom of the lake is that it is bottomless. Beer cans on the bottom of shallow lakes: shall this not react on the minds of men?

Or take angling with a fly rod. As everyone knows who has been absorbed into its rhythms and cadences, this is a contemplative enterprise taken up at best in solitude or at least in the company of intimate friends. To this day, one speaks of "presenting" the fly and of "addressing" the trout. Presenting and addressing involve working

the line in two dimensions that are so interlaced as to make it impossible to separate them. What goes on in the air determines what eventuates in the water; what one is addressing in the water determines the rhythm in the air. It is like, it is, fronting a fact. Anyone who has had his arm extended and bounded by a fly rod will know immediately what Thoreau meant when he said he fished in *two* elements. "It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element, which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook."<sup>25</sup> And that is what happens when a thing, and we with it, are in place.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 159 ("The Ponds").

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